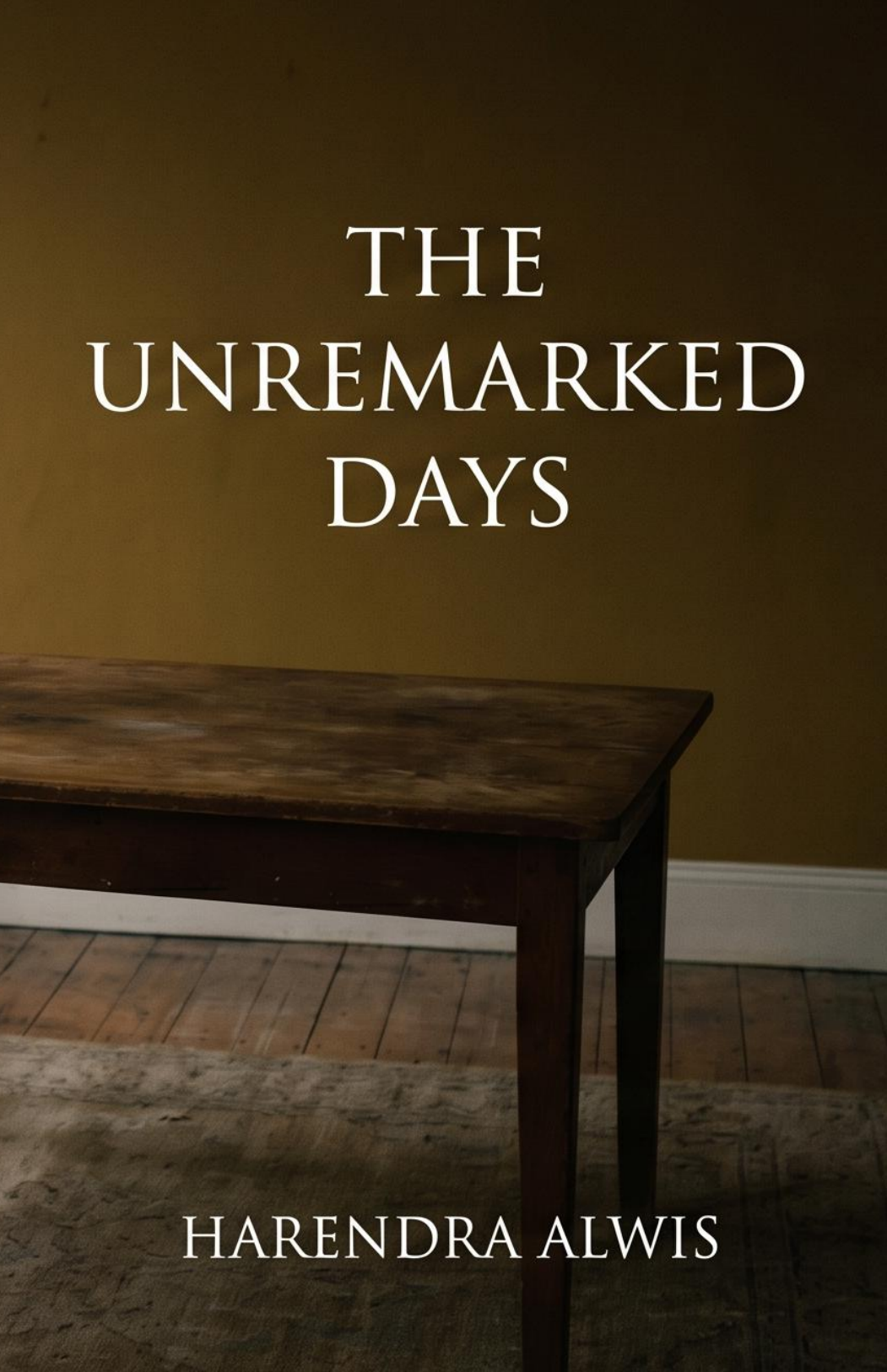
THE UNREMARKED DAYS



HARENDRA ALWIS

The Unremarked Days

Harendra Alwis

2026

To honour the memory of

Norman Phillips Campbell (1886-1917)

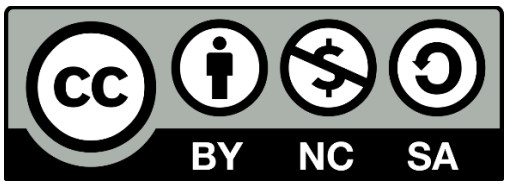
Scientist, Missionary, Soldier,
Teacher at Trinity College, Kandy,
Moulder of the souls of men.

First edition

Hardcover

Paperback

Kindle



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Preface

Before you were old enough to choose anything, a great deal was chosen for you. The language you think in, the things that move you to laughter or to anger, the work you have been taught to honour, the company you have been taught to keep and the words you have been taught to avoid, the prayers said over your cradle if any were said and the way the table was set in the house you grew up in — all of these were chosen for you long before you see or use them, and they have been furnishing the rooms of your mind ever since. Some of what you have been given is precious beyond reckoning. Some of it is mistaken. Some of it is harming you, or harming others through you, in ways you have not yet found the words to describe. The work of becoming a person worth being is in large part the work of learning to describe them, and to do something honest with that description.

This book is about that work.

It is not a book that will tell you what to think. Books that do that are easy to write and useless to anyone past the first reading. You are owed something more demanding. What you will find here, instead, is a way of looking — at yourself, at the people around you, at the country you have been formed in and at the larger world whose shape is being decided in your lifetime. There are ways of looking that can obscure and ways that illuminate. The illumination of what you have and what you alone can choose to do with it is what the book is for. Once you can focus the light, you will see

things you have not been seeing, and you will see them in your own life rather than in mine.

This means you will have to work. The book is short enough to be read in a few sittings, but it is not the kind of book that lets you read it lightly and move on. Each chapter will open a room which you need to furnish with what you have lived through and memories you have accumulated, what you have witnessed from afar, what you have done and what you have not yet brought yourself to do. I will not supply the cases for you. Your kitchen table is yours; I have never sat at it. Your friendship that failed the test is yours; I never knew the friend. Your workplace, the master you have been watching there, the colleague who said in the meeting what no one else would say, or the meeting in which no one said it — these are yours. The book is built so that you can walk into it and find that the rooms in your mind are large enough to hold what you have been carrying.

There is one exception. Late in the book a particular case is worked at length, with the eight people in an annex and the five who hid them there, because the question that case puts cannot be put without it. That chapter is the one chapter the book carries fully furnished. Everything before it is preparation for the answer you will discover for yourself there. The answer you will give there is about the kind of person you will have been becoming across the unremarked days. The book trusts you to recognise this when you reach it.

I must also say a word here about the harder things. Some of what this book has to say about the present moment is uncomfortable. The country you live in, whichever country it

is, has been doing things in your lifetime that will need to be answered for. The institutions you have been formed by have been failing in ways the book will name. The people who have been telling you what to think have been, in many cases, deceived themselves about what they were telling you. The book will not flinch from these things and it will ask you not to flinch either. You may find that you disagree with what the book says about a particular case. That is welcome, and the book is built to be argued with rather than submitted to. What the book asks is that you argue with it carefully, against what it is actually saying rather than what is easiest to dismiss, and that you do the same with anyone who tells you anything important from now on.

This book is for the person at the threshold — the person who has not yet decided what kind of person they will become, and who has begun to suspect that the question matters more than the world around them is admitting. You may be fifteen as you read this, or twenty, or fifty. The threshold is not an age; it is a position, and it is reached and lost and reached again across a life. If you have arrived at it now, the book is for you. If you arrived at it years ago and have been making the slow walk that began there, the book is also for you, and the recognition of yourself in its pages will be your own. If you are reading this because someone who loves you has asked you to, you may take the gift seriously without taking offence at having received it; the friend who gave you the book is doing what the book itself will, in time, ask you to do for someone else.

The book makes a few promises that are worth stating plainly. It will not flatter you. It will not pretend that the questions it raises have easier answers than they have. It will

not tell you that the work is easy or that the harvest is in your lifetime. It will also not tell you that the work is impossible, or that the harvest never comes. What it will tell you is that the work is real, that the work has been done before, that the work can be done again, and that the doing of it is the only honest answer to having received what you have received.

The road begins on the next page. Before it does, I will say only this: you are not alone in having noticed that something is not right. The will and capacity to notice is the first thing this book trusts in you.

Everything that follows is what to do with it.

I
What We Have Been Given

You did not begin from nothing. Before you were old enough to weigh anything, a great deal was placed in you. The cast of your affections, the bend of your judgement and the way the table was set in the house you grew up in, are all part of your inheritance. The five chapters of this movement will walk you through what you have received, in what different ways, at what different depths, and bring you to the recognition that you have also been making something of it the whole time, often without registering yourself as a maker.

1

The Table.

There is a table somewhere in the years of your childhood. It may have stood in one house or in several; it may have been the table in the kitchen where you ate most evenings, or the table in some other house where you were sometimes welcomed and sometimes not. Whatever it was, the tables at which you sat regularly, or the absence of one, is part of you now in a way you do not quite remember it being embedded in your sense of who you are.

Whether it was wood or Formica, whether it sat four or twelve, whether the meals at it were elaborate or hurried, the table is part of you now in a way you do not quite remember being instructed in. The way it was set, where you sat and who you sat next to. The dish you reach for first. The conversations that were welcome and the ones that were not. The hour at which the family gathered, if the family gathered at an hour at all. The grace, or the absence of grace. None of this was explained to you. You absorbed it across the years that you were not yet old enough to be in the kitchen by yourself, and by the time you were old enough to think of the table as anything but the simple fact of your home, it was already inside you — settling into the shape against which

every other table you will sit at, for the rest of your life, will be unconsciously measured.

The table is one piece of furniture among a great many that were carried into the rooms of your mind before you were old enough to ask who was doing the carrying. The language you think in is another. You did not choose it; you were chosen by it, in the months and years when your mouth was working its way into the sounds it would make for the rest of your days. The intonations of the voices that comforted you are in you. The cadences of the anger and the patience of the people who raised you, whoever they were. The accent of the place you were small in, even if you have spent the years since trying to lose it. The proverbs your grandmother said over the cooking — you find yourself saying them now, sometimes, in the same voice she used, and you cannot quite remember the first time you heard them.

The affections are furniture too. What moves you to tenderness, and what moves you to anger. The small loyalties you cannot give a reason for. The small dislikes that come up in you unbidden, against certain kinds of habits in others or certain kinds of places, that you may not even agree with when you examine them but that arrive in you before your examination can begin. The work you have been taught to honour: the doctor, perhaps, or the engineer, or the soldier, or the farmer, or the priest. The work you have been taught to feel a quiet condescension toward, even if no one ever said the word aloud. The company you have been taught to keep, and the company you have been taught to avoid. The kind of person you have been taught to admire and the kind you have been taught not to trust. None of this was served to you on a tray with a label. It came in the way everything comes into a

small child — as the air of the place they are in, as simply what the world is.

The bend of your judgement was laid down in the same way. You did not decide what your reasoning would slope toward; you were shaped, across the years before you were old enough to be present at your own shaping, into the kind of mind that finds certain conclusions natural and other conclusions strange. You do not arrive at most of your judgements; you depart from them. They are the place your reasoning begins, and the reasoning that follows is, much of the time, the working out of what the beginning already contained.

I want to say something about how this happened, because I think you may have been carrying the wrong picture of it. The picture you have probably been given is one in which inheritance is the explicit teaching — the things your parents told you, the things you were taught in school, the doctrines of your religion if you had one and the laws of the country you were born into. This explicit teaching is part of the inheritance, and an important part. But it is the smallest part by a great margin, and it is not the part that has done the deepest work on you. What has done the deepest work on you is the air you were breathing all those years — the things that were not taught because they did not need to be taught, the things that were so much taken for granted by the people around you that no one thought to make them explicit. What was permissible to laugh at. Whose seriousness was respected and whose was not. Which questions were welcome and which were quietly steered away from. How a man held himself when he was angry. How a woman held herself when she was tired. How money was talked about, if it was talked

about at all. How death was talked about. These you absorbed without anyone teaching you anything. They are in you now in a way no curriculum could have put them.

And alongside the air there was the evidence of your own eyes. You watched the people around you. You watched what they did when they thought no one was looking, and you watched what they did when they knew they were being watched. And you noticed, even before you could have described what you were noticing, the places where the two were not the same. You watched who was rewarded and who was not, who was promoted in the small economies of the household or the schoolyard and who was set aside, and you drew, from the pattern of who was rewarded and who was not, conclusions about how the world worked that no one ever sat you down to explain. By the time you were old enough to be told the world's official story about itself, you had already been gathering the unofficial story for years, and the two stories did not always match.

I am going to spend a chapter, before long, on what to do when these different ways of receiving fall into disagreement with one another, because that is one of the great structural problems of becoming a person. For now, I want only to make the point that they exist — that what has come down to you came down in more than one way, and lodged in you at more than one depth, and that no honest account of your formation can pretend you were only ever told things and only ever assented to them or rejected them as a deliberate mind would. You were not a mind first and then a person. You were a person first, with the formation that being a person in that household, that schoolroom, that street, that country lays

down, and the mind you have now is the mind that formation made possible.

Most of what you carry came from people you never met, and through people you barely thought about. The advice that old people in your life gave you when you were small — where did they learn them? Most likely from the old people who were around when they were small, who had learned them from those who came before. The motions the hands of those who fed you made when they spoke — where did those motions come from? The bend of judgement that made certain kinds of work seem dignified to them and certain kinds seem beneath them— what did that come down through? The line backward is longer than you can see. By the time anything reaches you, it has passed through generations of people who shaped it in passing, kept what they wanted to keep, set aside what they wanted to set aside, added what they had to add, and handed on what was left. Some of what you carry is older than your country. Some of it is older than your religion. Some are so old that no one alive remembers when it began, and yet it is still doing its work in you, recognisable, faithful to itself, and alive and animated in your faithful imitation of it.

This is the structural condition of being human. You did not begin from nothing; nobody does. The picture of a sovereign individual who chooses their commitments from a neutral starting place is a picture of nothing that has ever existed. Every person is a node in a chain that began before them and will continue after them, and the chain is what they have been receiving, often without realising they have received anything. To grow up is not to escape the chain — that is not

possible — but to discover that one is a product of it and can only exist in it.

The inheritance is, in any honest accounting, mixed. Some of what you have received is precious beyond reckoning. The capacity to love particular people, which is far from automatic and is largely the gift of having been loved well by someone in your childhood. The capacity to do honest work, which is the mark of every adult you watched do honest work when no one was making them. The capacity to keep your word, which is the bequest of every promise you saw kept and every betrayal you saw refused. The capacity to be moved by what should move you, which is a habit acquired from having lived among people whose responses to the world were calibrated in ways you absorbed. These you should not undervalue. You did not earn them. They came to you because someone, somewhere along the chain, did the work that put them within reach, and you grew up close enough to that work to be reached by it. For some readers, the inheritance has been thinner than this paragraph describes, or has come from a smaller number of hands than the chain implies. That is also part of what is to be honestly looked at, and the rest of this book has been written with that reader in mind too.

Some of what you have received is mistaken. Every household has its blind spots. Every street has its small dishonesties. Every country has its myths about itself that do not stand up to the evidence. Some of what your people have believed about themselves and about other peoples is wrong. Some of what they have believed about how the world works is wrong. Some of what they have taught you to feel without articulating is wrong. Discovering this is one of the harder

tasks of growing up, and one of the most necessary, because the mistaken parts of the inheritance will go on doing their work in you if you do not bring them up where they can be examined. They will steer your judgements without your knowing they are doing the steering. They will narrow what you can imagine doing, who you can imagine being close to, what you can recognise as a problem and what you cannot. The mistaken parts of the inheritance are not corrected by being denounced; they are corrected by being seen for what they are and replaced, in the slow work of years, with something more truthful.

Some of what you have received is doing active harm. This is harder to say. There are things in every inheritance that ought never to have been transmitted — small cruelties, large lies, habits of mind that have made the people who carried them less able to live with themselves and less able to live with others. Some of these have been transmitted to you. You may be carrying them now without knowing it; you may be teaching them, unawares, to children you have or will have; you may be enacting them daily on people you have not yet learned to see. To take honest stock of what one has inherited is, eventually, to come up against this. It is not a pleasant realization at all. It is also not a realization anyone is exempt from, and to be exempt from it is only to have refused to make it, not to have actually escaped what one carries.

You are not the end of the chain. Whatever you carry, you will pass on something to those who come after you, and what you pass on will be some mixture of what was given to you and what you have done with what was given to you. You may pass on the inheritance more or less unaltered, in which case the precious will go forward and the mistaken will go

forward and the harming will go forward, all in the proportions they reached you in. You may pass on a thinner version of the inheritance, having cut out parts of it without quite replacing them, in which case those who come after you will be living among ruins they did not make. You may pass on a thicker version, having added what was missing in what you received, in which case those who come after you will be the beneficiaries of work that was done in their name before they could thank you for it. Most people pass on a mixture of all three. The question is not whether you will hand something on; you will. The question is what.

I want to leave you, at the end of this first chapter, with a small task that I will not check on. Sometime in the next day or two, when you are doing something ordinary — eating a meal or walking somewhere familiar or sitting in a room you sit in often — let your mind go to a specific thing about yourself that you did not choose. It can be small. The way you greet a stranger for example or the food you crave when you are tired. The phrase you use for goodbye or the reflex that makes you offer your seat or not offer your seat. The small loyalty or the small dislike. And then, just for a moment, let yourself trace it backward. Where did this come from? Whose voice was it first? Whose hands were doing this motion before yours did? You will not find the whole answer because the chain runs longer than you can see. But you will catch some sense of how much of you came from somewhere you cannot quite reach, and how many hands you have never met have been working in you and through you the whole time.

That sense — that you are made of more than you remember being given — is the place this book begins.

Everything that follows is what to do with what you find when you start to look.

2

Said, Felt, Done.

There were three ways the world came into you, when you were growing up. They did not announce themselves as three; they came in mixed together, and you absorbed them as a single thing called the world. But they were not a single thing, and learning to tell them apart and to feel, in the moment, which of the three you are dealing with, is one of the cleanest pieces of equipment a person can be given for the work of becoming honest with oneself.

The first is the thing that was said. The explicit instruction. The lessons of the household, the schoolroom, the temple or the church or the mosque if you were brought up to one of them. The do's and dont's those who taught you repeated. The rules your elders laid down. The values of the school your headmaster spoke about at assembly. The doctrines of your religion, if any, that were articulated to you in so many words. This is the channel of inheritance you have probably been most aware of, because it arrives in language, and language is what you have for examining what you have received. You can repeat what was said to you. You can argue with it. You can agree or disagree as your mind inevitably learns to do. You can pass it on or refuse to pass it on. The said is the channel that is most easily brought up into the light of day for

inspection. This is also why it is the channel that, when something has gone wrong with your formation, is the slowest to highlight the damage. What is 'said' is what gets corrected first, because correcting it is easiest, and the people inside a household or a school or a country can continue to say the right things long after the other channels have stopped agreeing with the saying.

The second is the thing that was felt. This is the channel below speech, the things that came in to you not through anyone's telling but through the way the people around you held themselves, the way they reacted before they thought, the small involuntary signals — a tightening at the mouth, a softening in the voice, a quick exchange of glances between two adults that meant nothing to you in the moment and that you remember now as having meant a great deal. What is felt is the air you were breathing in the house, in the school and in the street where you played. It includes the things that were never said because they did not need to be said: who in the household was respected and who was tolerated and what subjects were welcome in conversation and what subjects produced an unspecified discomfort that everyone learned to navigate around. You did not consciously absorb any of this. You took it in as a fish takes in water — without noticing it as a thing, because it was the medium you were living in. By the time you were old enough to wonder what your assumptions were, the feeling had been at work in you for so long that what it had taught you felt like simply what was true.

The third is the thing that was done. What was actually rewarded; what was actually punished; what was actually praised and what was actually shamed; who was propelled

forward in the corridors of your house and your schoolyard and who was held back; whose tantrum got results and whose tears were ignored; whose word was treated as binding and whose was treated like fallen leaves. You watched all of this, even when no one was teaching you to watch. Children are exquisite observers of practice, because they do not yet have the adult capacity to discount the evidence of their own eyes when the evidence contradicts the official story. They take in what is done with the same matter-of-factness with which they take in what is felt — but unlike what we feel, which is largely involuntary on the part of the one feeling, the done is the channel through which a household or an institution most fully reveals its actual operating values and norms, as distinct from those it professes about itself.

These three came to you together, and most of the time, in most of the places that formed you, you would have learned to notice but absorb the contradictions between them as something to be expected and accommodated, (even though the explicit channel would have carried messages about why you shouldn't). If, and whenever they were singing in unison, you would not have noticed that there were three. You would have experienced the place as one thing. The alignment between those three channels is what makes a place feel like it is working. You are not picking up three readings and assembling them into a verdict; you are receiving one thing that the three together amount to. This integration, when it holds, is a kind of quiet at the back of one's life that one does not register until it is gone. It is what makes it possible to grow up without having to do double work on every relationship — to take what one is told at face value, to assume that what feels right matches what one is told to do

and to expect that what one watches being done will match both.

There is a name for what place it becomes where the said, the felt and the done are in alignment, but I am going to defer naming it until later in the book, because I want you to first be able to recognise it from its absence rather than its presence. Because you can only know what it is by what it has been like, in your life, when it has not been there.

The three channels are notoriously difficult to align at the best of times, but the bigger, stronger and more successful a place is, the more difficult it becomes. It is always up to the people in a place to do the work of keeping the three channels as aligned as possible, but something happens to a place when the people forgo that responsibility for whatever reason. The cracks become part of the architecture of the building. The people inside such a place would have received the same three readings, but they may have been receiving them for so long that they stopped noticing them as three separate channels - let alone be able to register the disagreement among them. That is because people often make a quiet truce with the cracks. The truce takes the form of treating the said as the official story of the place, even when the said is no longer matched by what is done and what is felt about what is being done. They go on repeating the said in the customary places — the meetings, the assemblies, the public statements and even at the dinner table — and they go on living by what is done. Even when they feel terrible inside as a result of the unholy compromise, they accept the discomfort and erosion of their felt morality as a fair price to pay for the benefits they stand to accrue or simply what they stand not to lose by not speaking out. It is not that they stop noticing that the saying

and the doing have parted company, but they learn to accept it because they can argue and rationalise what arrives through those channels, whereas the felt channel seems so mysterious and inarticulate that they are able to dismiss what they feel as a personal delusion or blind ‘idealism’ pitted against the practicalities of the world.

You, especially if you are young, will be the one who notices, because the young especially find it difficult to make that truce. If you haven't made that truce, it is because you simply have not yet been able to convince yourself that the cracks appearing on the walls are part of the architect’s design or that the emperor is indeed wearing a magnificent robe and the only reason you are unable to see it is because you are stupid.

The most familiar form of parting is between the said and the done. You were told one thing and shown another by the same lips. You were promised that hard work would be rewarded, and you watched the lazy and well-connected promoted over the diligent and obscure. You were told that the rules applied to everyone equally, and you watched them applied to some and waived for others. You were told that your school stood for certain values, and you watched your school protect, when it had to choose, the people who violated those values rather than the people who upheld them. You were told that your country honoured certain principles, and you watched your country, when those principles became inconvenient, set them aside without admitting it had set them aside. You did not have words for what you were noticing. But you were noticing, and the noticing left a dent in your body, and the dent is part of how you now present to the world.

I want to be careful here. The gap between what is said and what is done is not always evidence of dishonesty in the people who are saying. Sometimes the gap is a sign of weakness — of people who genuinely wish to live up to what they are saying but have not yet been able to. Sometimes it is a sign of complexity — of a situation in which the principle that was articulated turns out to be harder to apply than those who articulated it knew enough to acknowledge. Sometimes it is a sign of historical lag — of a household or institution still using the language of an earlier moment without having noticed that the practice has drifted. The gap, by itself, does not tell you which of these is going on. It only tells you that there is a gap. What you do with it depends on what kind of gap it is, and the discrimination among the kinds of gaps that appear is some of the work the rest of this book will give you the equipment to inspect.

But there is one kind of gap that is graver than the others, and I want to spend the rest of this chapter on it. It is the gap that has been going on long enough, and is large enough, that those who say one thing while doing another are no longer registering the gap at all. They have stopped feeling the contradiction. They proclaim what they proclaim, and they live as they live, and the two have settled into different compartments of their lives that can no longer see or speak to each other. They are not being dishonest in the way someone is dishonest who knowingly tells a lie; they are being dishonest in the deeper way of having stopped noticing that they have been harbouring a lie for years. This kind of gap is the one that does the most damage to the young people who grow up inside it, because the young people are the ones who still see the gap and the adults around them are the ones who

no longer do, and there is no language available to the young people for what they are seeing, because the adults have stopped having the language for it themselves.

If you have grown up inside such a gap — and many readers will have, because there are few places left where the gap is not present in some form — some of what you carry is the carrying of it. You may have learned, very young, to function in two languages at once: the language in which the proclaimed story of your household or your school, or country was told, and the language in which the actual operations of those places ran. You learned to use each language in the right place. You learned, also, that pointing out the discrepancy did not get you what pointing out the discrepancy should have got you; it got you, at best, ignored, and at worst, punished. You learned, in other words, to be one of the people who knows about the gap and has agreed not to mention it. This is a quiet capitulation that the people who made it almost never name as such, and it is one of the things that happens early in a person's life that determines, in part, what kind of person they become later. If this sounds all too abstract and you are thirsting for examples to make concrete sense of what I am describing, bear with me, because I am going to come back to it.

There is a third kind of parting I have not yet said much about in this chapter, and I want to do so now, but only briefly, because it is the subject of the next chapter on its own. The third channel — what is felt — is the deepest, and the hardest to bring up where it can be examined, because it never arrived in you as words. You absorbed it as the atmosphere of the places you were small in. When how you feel deep inside of you is in agreement with what you are saying and

doing, you do not feel it as a separate channel; it is simply the way the world is. When how you feel about something is in disagreement with the other two, you feel something is wrong without being able to say what. It is a discomfort you cannot name and an unease that does not respond to the official story of the place. This is the chronic sense, in certain rooms, that the air is not quite right, although no one in the room is doing anything you could point to as the cause of the wrongness. These are the registrations of the third channel telling you something the other two are not telling you. Learning to take them seriously, without letting them become a paranoid sixth sense that makes you distrust everything, is one of the harder pieces of the work this book will ask of you.

For now, I want only the simple division. There are three channels through which what has formed you came in. They can agree, and when they do, you have the experience of being in a place that is whole. They can disagree, and when they disagree the place is not whole, and you, especially when you are young, will be the one who notices first. Noticing the disagreement is just the first step. It is the information that you must allow to trigger deeper and more conscious thought and eventually, wise action. How to become deeply aware and conscious of such disagreements and act on them wisely is the work I hope this book will help you to do. It is work which - if done well - will fill you with purpose, if done moderately may make you feel virtuous or justly indignant but without deep contentment, or leave you miserable if done poorly or not at all.

I would not blame you if the language of three channels still feels abstract. Let me give you, in the way I promised in the preface I would, not a case I have constructed for you, but a

vessel you can fill in yourself. Somewhere in the years you have lived already, there was a place — a home, a school, a club, a place of worship or a workplace — where the official story of the place and the daily operation of the place did not match. If you don't have one in mind immediately, you will if you put the book down for a moment and think about it for a minute. The place said one thing about itself and lived another, and you were inside it for a while, and the inside-it-ness of it shaped you, and the shaping is still operating in you now. I am not going to ask you to do anything with that recognition yet. I am only going to ask you to register it. The place existed; you were in it; the gap was real; you saw it and perhaps more importantly, felt it.

That is what the rest of the book is going to build on. Everything that follows assumes that you have noticed, in your own life, that the saying and the feeling of it and the doing in places that formed you have not always agreed with each other, and that the disagreements have left dents in you that you are still carrying. The work this book proposes is the work of becoming honest about those dents, finding the company within which such honesty becomes possible, and doing what one can to keep the saying and the feeling and the doing — in oneself first, and then in the places one is part of — from coming apart in the way one has watched them come apart elsewhere. The point is not to achieve perfect alignment between all three channels. Rather, it is to understand the profoundly human fallibilities that make such perfect alignment practically impossible to maintain for any significant length of time, but also the vital and indispensable work of doing what can be done to align them, ceaselessly, nevertheless.

Before any of that work can begin, however, we have to spend a chapter on the deepest of the three channels — the one below words, the one you absorbed when you were too small to realise that you were absorbing anything. That is where the book turns next.

3

Below Words.

There are things you know that you cannot tell me how you know.

If you are a perceptive person, you will recognise this at once. Perhaps you can think of a friend you instinctively trusted before they had done anything to earn your trust. Perhaps you remember a room you walked into and immediately wanted to leave, although no one in it had said or done anything you could point to. Often, we can feel the arrival of recognition well before our reasoning has even begun. The rightness or wrongness we often feel in our 'gut' is difficult to put into words. That is not due to any form of failure of your reasoning, but the resonance of an information channel that is deeper than your reasoning, which was laid down in you long before your reasoning began. I called it, in the last chapter, the channel of what is felt. That phrase is precise enough for what it does, but it does not yet convey the depth at which the feeling happened. What those feelings showed you was not shown to your mind, because you did not have a mind in the sense in which an adult has a mind, at the time you felt it. It was shown to whatever was in you before you had a mind — to the long pre-articulate self that was watching, before words, the people who were holding

you and feeding you and looking at you and not quite looking at you. That self, took in everything. It took in the rhythms of the voice that comforted it and the rhythms of the voice that did not. It took in the smell of the rooms it was carried through and the smell of the people who carried it. It took in the texture of being looked at with love and the texture of being looked at with something less than love. By the time you had words, you had a great deal already inside you that words would never quite reach.

What lives at that level cannot be brought up into the open the way the things at the level of speech can. The things at the level of speech can be articulated, repeated, examined, agreed with or rejected, written down and argued with at the dinner table. The things at the level below speech can only be observed by what they make you do and feel. You cannot inspect them directly. You can only see them when they come up in you as a reaction — when something stirs in you and you do not quite know why. That stirring is your first clue that some buried inheritance has been activated.

I want to say two seemingly opposite things about this level, and they have to be held together, because recognizing one without the other will lead you astray.

The first is that this level is often where the soundest wisdom you carry lives. The instant recognition of a person as untrustworthy, before any of the reasons can be articulated, is often the result of a thousand small observations that your pre-articulate self made of similar people in your earliest years, watching what they did and what came of it. The unease you cannot name is often a perfectly accurate reading of a situation that your articulate self has not yet caught up to.

The instinctive movement of compassion and the instinctive refusal to do something dishonourable are the operations of a part of you that knows what it knows by having been formed in a school you do not consciously remember attending, by teachers you cannot consciously name. People who try to live entirely by the channel of speech, distrusting everything that has not been brought up into argument, miss most of the wisdom available to them. They miss it because it does not arrive in the form they have decided to take seriously and they cannot find a place to put it.

The second thing is that this level can be a prison. The same channel that carries the wisdom carries also whatever was wrong in the air you were breathing. If you grew up in a household that had quietly settled into a small cruelty toward an unwelcome animal, distrust of a particular relative, intolerance toward a particular class of person or toward children who did not develop on the household's schedule and by its rules, you would have absorbed that along with everything else, and it is in you now, operating, and you will feel it as a personal instinct rather than as something you have been given. If you grew up in a country that had taught itself, through the air it breathed for generations, to despise certain other peoples or to congratulate itself on its own special character, the despising or the self-congratulation is in you. You will not feel it as an ideology. Instead, you will feel it as the obvious. If you grew up among people who treated certain questions as not worth asking, those questions will not occur to you spontaneously. They will not be there in the field of things you can think of. Whole regions of available human possibility will be missing from your sense of what is

possible, and their absence will not feel like an absence at all; it will feel as the world simply having the shape it has.

This is the prison. It is a particularly difficult prison to escape because the bars are made of the same material as the eyes you would need to see them with. The cruelty or the despising or the missing region of possibility cannot be brought up into examination the way a stated belief can, because it never lodged as a stated belief. It just engulfs you and sustains you like the air you breathe. The arguments you might use against it engage the channel of speech; but the channel of speech is not where it lives. This is the domain of what seems obvious and true to you, and you can only recognise it by paying attention to how it differs from some of what seems obvious to others. That requires an immense capacity for empathy.

I want to say something more about how this works, because the difficulty of it is often misunderstood, and the misunderstanding sets people up for a particular kind of failure. The arguments you encounter that contradict what you have felt in your gut from the time you were a child, do not feel to you like arguments to be objectively evaluated. Instead, they feel like the demolition of the house you are living in, while you are inside. That is why, the intuitive response they elicit is the response of a person whose very safety is being threatened. You may not be able to articulate why the new claim is wrong; you only know that it is, that something in you refuses it and that it produces a discomfort in you that you immediately try to find words for, even though the words always feel slightly inadequate to describe the discomfort they are supposed to be expressing.

This is both the gift and burden of having a deep and heavy intuition. The same condition that makes you the bearer of accumulated wisdom makes you, also, the bearer of accumulated error. The error is not in you as a position you hold. Instead, you shelter within it like the roof you sleep under. To question the roof is to risk having to sleep in the cold rain, and having the roof over one's house ripped apart by someone only for you to have to rebuild it alone in harsh weather is much harder than people who have not had to do it would dare to admit. You have to find the new material, and you have to learn to assemble it, and you have to keep your vigilance for long enough to make sure it stays in place during storms and does not leak in the rain. This takes years. It cannot be done in an evening, no matter how good the argument is.

There is a more general fact about the human condition that the discussion in this chapter has been quietly assuming and that I want to make explicit before we go further. You are a finite creature operating with limited information. The eyes you see with respond to a small range of the electromagnetic spectrum — the part we call visible light — and the rest of the spectrum, which is enormously larger than the visible part, passes through and around you every moment of your life without registering on your senses at all. Your ears respond to a similarly small range of the frequencies at which sound can be made. The rest of your senses are constrained in the same way. The world you experience is not the world as it is; the world you experience is the small sample of the world that your particular kind of creature has been built to register. This is not a deficiency of yours; it is the condition of being any particular kind of creature in a universe much

larger than any particular kind of creature can hold. But it is worth registering, because the same kind of limitation operates in your capacity to imagine what could be otherwise, and in your capacity to do what you can imagine. You are working with a small instrument in a very large room. The judgements that the small instrument produces deserve to be held with the modesty that the smallness of the instrument warrants.

Since the middle of the 20th century, we have been discovering many new and fascinating insights about how this transmission works at the deepest level. Some of these discoveries are recent enough that you may not have encountered them, and they will bring into sharper focus what the rest of this chapter is going to ask of you.

For a long time, the deepest channel of information was treated by serious people as a matter of teaching and example only. We knew that children watch their adults and that they take in what the adults do. So, it was assumed, and not in complete error, that obedience and observation were the means by which who and what the adults 'are' got reproduced in the children. This was true enough, and it was most of what was going on. But there is increasing reason to think that some of the transmission happens at a level beneath even the watching. The bodies of people who have lived through extreme deprivation, sustained terror and the conditions of famine or persecution, appear to carry epigenetic signatures of that experience that get passed down to children and, in some studies, to their grandchildren. The signatures show up in how the bodies of the descendants regulate stress, in how they metabolise certain substances and in how they respond to certain kinds of pressure. The science is not yet settled on

how far down the line this transmission reaches or how reliable the mechanisms are. It is a live area of inquiry and you should not take any strong claims about it on faith. But the broad shape of what is being found is consistent with what people who have done close work on inherited suffering have been saying for decades: that some of what shapes the deepest layer of you came in through your grandparents' bodies as well as through their words and their example. The inheritance runs deeper than was once believed, and it runs through channels that the inheritor cannot reach by introspection alone.

This is sobering and it is also very useful. It is sobering because it tells you that some of what is in you at the deepest level was placed there by events you had no part in and by people who had no part in placing it consciously. It is useful because it removes a certain kind of self-blame that people sometimes carry when they find, in themselves, responses that feel disproportionate to anything in their own life. You have, perhaps, an anxiety that exceeds what your circumstances warrant; perhaps a vigilance that is larger than the threat you face; perhaps a difficulty trusting that runs deeper than the betrayals you have personally suffered. Some of this — not all, but some — may be an inheritance from the community that surrounds you or the one you are descended from. You did not earn it; you inherited it. You can still do the work of replacing your existing roof, but you can do that work without flagellating yourself for the roof that was already there, because the original roof was built for you by others whose names you may not even know.

Before I take up the harder case, I want to describe one of the enduring aspects of human nature that exist just beneath

the surface of our conscious selves. The mechanism is what I am going to call, with deliberate plainness, ‘a bargain’. It is one that has been described far more elegantly by Rousseau as follows:

> *Citizens allow themselves to be oppressed only insofar as they are driven by blind ambition; and looking more below than above them, domination becomes more dear to them than independence, and they consent to be bound by chains in order to be able to earn the right to bind others. It is very difficult to reduce to obedience someone who does not seek to command; and the most adroit politician would never succeed in subjecting men who wanted merely to be free. But inequality spreads easily among ambitious and cowardly souls always ready to run the risks of fortune and, almost indifferently, to dominate or serve, according to whether it becomes favourable or unfavourable to them.*
>
> – Jean-Jacques Rousseau
> (Discourse on the Origins of Inequality, 1755)

In many of the arrangements human beings live inside - these could be households, workplaces, professions and institutions of every kind that organise their members in hierarchies - the people at the lower levels of the arrangement accept the costs of being where they are. This is in part because they have come to expect, often without quite letting themselves see the expectation in this form, that the costs are a payment toward a future in which they will be the ones at the higher levels of the arrangement, and the costs will be paid to them by those who come after. The bargain is rarely explicit. It is dangled in front of them rather than an explicit

promise. It is just assumed, in the way the people at the higher levels carry themselves, in the small honours the arrangement reserves for those who have served long enough to reach them and in the casual remarks about how things were even worse in earlier generations. The bargain is one of the structural reasons that arrangements which inflict costs on their lower members persist across generations. Because the lower members are not merely enduring the costs. They are, in part of themselves, banking the endurance against a future settlement. We will have to come back to the bargain at several points in this book, because the refusal of it is one of the most consequential exercises in freedom a person can make in the course of an adult life. I mentioned it here only so that the term will be familiar when I use it again, and so that I can use it now to distinguish a different mechanism — one that operates where the bargain itself is not available.

We must stay with this question of inherited damage, because there is a particular form of it that has shaped the substrate of more people, in more parts of the world, than is comfortable for most of us to acknowledge, and that the framework of this book needs to be able to both acknowledge and seek to address. The form is the substrate-condition produced in human beings by long systems of structured unfreedom — by chattel slavery and its aftermath, by colonial rule and its long and enduring aftermath, by the caste arrangements that have shaped - and continue to shape - the inner lives of vast populations across millennia, and by the conquests whose victors and victims have continued to share territory across generations.

These cases require care in how we must speak about them, because the surface analogy to what the earlier paragraph

called a 'bargain' — the willingness to accept suffering now in exchange for the prospect of power later — does not apply to them in the same form. The enslaved person under chattel slavery was not in a position to expect that their suffering would, in due course, give them the authority to inflict suffering in return. The colonised population was not, in any meaningful sense, choosing to be colonised in exchange for some future reciprocation. The mechanism by which substrate transmission occurred under these conditions was a different mechanism, and it has to be named differently.

What happened in these systems was that human beings were placed in conditions under which resistance to the system meant death, and survival required that the system's account of the world be at least partially internalised. The inferiority the system asserted on those whom it subjugated and the worthiness of those who created such systems so that they could assert their superiority and will over others, and confer upon themselves both honour and righteousness by virtue of the order and wealth the system produced for their benefit. Some of these ideas persist in the substrate of those who survived such systems, not as their explicit beliefs but as the infested water they had to drink to survive. The internalisation was not a form of consent in any morally meaningful sense. It was the price of survival, extracted under conditions where outright refusal was punished by death. The substrate-conditions it produced were carried forward in the descendants, long after the explicit legal arrangements of the system had ended, and the working through of those substrate conditions has been the long work of the populations who inherited them — work that remains incomplete in every country in which the relevant systems operated.

There is a second feature of this transmission that the framework has to both identify and then describe, because failing to do so would make the work harder than it would otherwise be. The systems of structured unfreedom shaped not only the substrate of those they oppressed but also the substrate of those they enriched. The descendants of slaveholders carry, in their formation, the sediment of the system that made their ancestors what they were. The descendants of colonisers carry the sediment of the system that formed their countries' wealth and self-account. The descendants of the higher castes carry the sediment of the order that gave them the position they continue to occupy or lament as having been forced at great pains to relinquish.

These sediments deposit themselves at depths the rest of this chapter has been describing as the ‘substrate’, which is below words, below deliberation and in the air of the households in which the descendants were raised. The working through of substrate damage from systems of structured unfreedom is therefore not the work of the descendants of the oppressed alone; it is the work of all the populations whose substrate was formed by the system, and the work of each is necessary if the larger working through - and indeed healing - is to occur.

The two African-American writers I would point you to if you want to read further on this, because their work is the most precise rendering of the substrate transmission I know of, are W.E.B. Du Bois on what he called double consciousness — the condition of seeing oneself through the eyes of those who had taught one's people to despise themselves — and Toni Morrison, in whose novels the substrate transmission across generations of people formed

by slavery and its aftermath is rendered with care that no theoretical account can match. The parallel work for colonial substrate damage has been done by Frantz Fanon and by many writers from the colonised world since. The parallel work for caste has been done by B.R. Ambedkar and many others.

I want to be careful, in closing this section, to reiterate what this book is not claiming. It is not claiming that the people who suffered under these systems consented to the systems, or that they were responsible for the persistence of the systems, or that the slow working through of substrate damage in their descendants is in any way the descendants' fault. The framework outlined in this book is claiming only that the substrate is transmitted across generations through means the inheritor cannot reach by introspection, and that the systems under which the substrate of certain populations was formed were systems that have left, in those populations and in the populations that shared territory with them, accumulated sediment - the extraction of which is the work of generations. This is one of the places where the patient labour the rest of this book will describe finds its hardest application, and one of the places where the truth-bearers each generation needs are most painfully required.

The structural condition I have been describing in this chapter has a consequence that I want to describe clearly before I let you out of it. The two preceding chapters have invited you to take stock of what you have inherited; this chapter has just told you that the deepest part of what you have inherited cannot be inspected directly and cannot be argued out of you. So how, then, are you supposed to know whether the deep channel in you is supplying you with sound

formation or with something that has been quietly malforming you?

The answer the book will return to in many places is that you cannot know this on your own. The deepest channel is not, by itself, a reliable witness against its own corruptions. For that, you need company. You need the slow exposure to people whose deepest channels were laid down by different hands and who therefore notice in you what your own deepest channel cannot notice in itself. You need the trustworthy friend who can say, gently, that the response you just had does not look like what you think it looks like from the inside. You need the great traditions — religious and philosophical and literary — which have been doing the work of articulating the corruptions of deep formation for thousands of years and which carry, in their accumulated reflection, much of what an individual cannot work out for themselves in a lifetime. You need the patience to live, for a while, under judgements about yourself that you do not yet agree with, in case the judgements are illuminating something in you that you cannot see in yourself.

This is the part of the work that the popular language of being true to yourself gets exactly wrong. The deepest channel in you is not, in any reliable way, the channel through which you should be told who you really are. It is the channel through which you have been formed, and what it tells you about who you really are is conditioned on what formation laid it down. To trust it absolutely is to make yourself the prisoner of whatever happened in the air of your earliest years. To distrust it absolutely is to cut yourself off from your deepest available wisdom. The only honest path is the difficult middle one: to take what the deepest channel makes

you feel, seriously, and to test it slowly, over time, in the company of others who can see in you what you cannot see in yourself. You must do so with the same urgency and enthusiasm with which you do everything else to find out about how to live well.

The next chapter is going to be lighter, because the work of this one has been heavy. But I want to leave you, before we go on, with a small task that is harder than the one at the end of the first chapter. Find, in your own life, an example of a deep intuition of yours that turned out to be sound, such as a wariness you could not justify at the time, a refusal you could not explain to anyone else, or a small unease that proved, later, to have been seeing something real. And then, with the honesty this kind of work requires, find an example of a deep intuition that turned out to have been wrong, such as an aversion that you came eventually to see as having been an inheritance you would not have chosen, a discomfort with a kind of person that, on later examination, you found you could not defend or an instinctive refusal of a possibility that, when you finally tried it, turned out to be the right thing. Both kinds of intuitions are in you. They came from the same channel. The work of becoming a person worth being is in part the work of learning to tell them apart, and the work of telling them apart is not work you can do alone.

That work is also what this book is about. So, the next chapter will turn to what you have been doing with what you have been given, even when you did not know you were doing anything.

4

The Excess.

You have been doing more than receiving.

Across the years in which the three channels were laying down their deposits in you, something else was happening alongside them. You were not only absorbing. You were, in small ways at first and then in larger ways as you grew, contributing. Every conversation in which you said what you actually thought, rather than what was expected of you, was a contribution; every time you used humour or staked your comfort to expose a difficult truth; every time you drew a small line that had not yet been drawn, or did not draw it. Every choice of friend, or choice of career; every new taste you tried that did not match the tastes of the household you grew up in; every silence, when speaking would have been easier and lying would have been easier still. You have been adding to what was given to you and giving back to society something with your signature on it the whole time, often without thinking about it as adding or changing.

This is the structural condition of being human that the first three chapters did not name directly. You are not merely an empty vessel into which a pre-formed inheritance is poured. You are a part of the chain, and the part you play has direction. What reaches the next link from you is not the same

as what reached you from the link before, even when you have not consciously tried to change anything. Some of the difference is involuntary — you are not your parents, you are not your siblings, you are not the community you identify with most strongly, and the version of what those around you handed you that you reproduce is bent by everything else you are. You may be the one who keeps the line when others around you have not kept it, even when the keeping costs you something the breaking would have spared you. You may be the one who breaks the line when others around you keep it, taking the small advantages the breaking confers and paying the small costs the breaking imposes on those who keep what you have broken. The bend in you that reshapes the substrate - whether you have chosen it or not - goes forward from you to whoever comes next.

Some of the difference is voluntary. You have been making choices, large and small, that have altered what gets carried forward, and the choices accumulate in directions you cannot always keep track of. The work you refused to do because the work would have required something you could not bring yourself to do. The conviction you arrived at on your own, against the inertia of where you grew up. The influence you had on people, the silence you broke and the jokes you did not laugh at. These have been your additions to what reached you, and the additions are real, and they have been going forward through you to those who come after you whether you have been keeping track of the going-forward or not.

I want to say something about why this matters, because the picture the first three chapters have been drawing could be read in a discouraging way, and the discouraging reading would be wrong. If everything in you came from somewhere

else, if the deepest channel cannot be inspected by you and if you are a node in a chain whose origins you cannot see — then it can begin to feel as though there is no you doing the carrying, only the chain using you to extend itself. This is only half of the truth, and like all half-truths it does more damage than a clean falsehood, because the half it gets right gives it the authority to mislead you about the half it gets wrong.

The half it gets right is that you did not begin from nothing. The half it gets wrong is that you are only what you have been given. You are not. Something arrives in the world with each new person that was not in the world before, and the new arrival is not the same kind of thing as what it joins. The new person carries an excess — a surplus of life over what would be needed merely to continue what is already there — and the surplus is the seedbed of everything that has ever changed in any people. The proof that the surplus is real is that things have changed, and continue to change. The world has not gone on identically reproducing itself across the generations. It never will, and the reason is the surplus each individual produces.

This does not mean that human society is so fluid as to be volatile. Change in human society and civilization happens through processes and interactions that we can observe, isolate and understand more than we may be inclined to assume. I don't want to make it seem overly simplistic, because it is not, and we should be very careful about any claims to the contrary. However, I will help you see for yourself some of the dynamics of human social evolution that you can recognise and test, and once you see them, you will

always be able to see and recognise their working patterns everywhere.

It starts with young human beings who see, in a particular way, what the old have stopped seeing. This is not because the young are wiser than the old; mostly they are not. It is because the young have come into the existing arrangements from outside, and the existing arrangements still look strange to them, in the way things look strange to anyone for whom they are not yet automatic. The old have been inside the arrangements long enough that the arrangements have become invisible to them; they have stopped seeing the things they once saw because the things have stopped registering. Why do men wear neckties that seem to have no explicit use or purpose? Why do we need money to survive when we have arguably survived for longer as a species without money and plants and animals are able to survive without money? The young who are in the early stage of acclimatisation to our civilisational reality are curious to know why adults do certain things that make no immediate sense outside of the specific civilisational context they have been accustomed to accept without question over time. They will, themselves, eventually stop noticing some of what they see — but while they are not in that stage, they will question and challenge even as they continue to pick up actions and belief systems that the long-time inhabitants just habitually perform and reproduce without question. What is invisible to a household in this way, is often visible to a child. What is invisible to a country is often visible to a young person not yet absorbed into its working assumptions. The visibility is short — it has a few years' span before formation closes over it — and

during those few years, the young are able to do reconnaissance work that the old can no longer do.

I am not making a romantic claim about youth. The young are often wrong. Their seeing is partial — they see what is strange but not necessarily what is important about the strangeness, and they do not yet have the experience to tell the two apart. They mistake the froth of their own first encounters with the world for the depth of mature judgement, and the mistake produces some of the most embarrassing convictions of youth, the ones the older self of the same person will be glad to have left behind. What the young have is not better judgement; it is fresher seeing. The two are not the same, and a culture that cannot differentiate between them can seriously damage itself.

What is needed is for the fresher seeing of the young to meet the mature judgement of those who have grown wise rather than merely accustomed. The two together can do what neither can do alone. The young see what the old have stopped seeing; the old can tell, of what the young have seen, what is worth keeping and what was only the froth of first encounter. The seeing without the sifting is restless and often destructive. Every new generation who believes that what its elders accept must be wrong simply because the elders accept it will never mature beyond adolescence. Similarly, the sifting without the seeing leads to inertia and suffocation. Older generations tend to persuade themselves that what worked once will work again, and what was settled is settled, and that the world will forever work the same way it has always worked. A society that has given into such thinking or considers it wisdom not dying, but for most purposes is already dead. However, the pairing of the old and new, in a

working configuration, is the way people advance through time without either drowning itself in custom or losing itself in novelty.

This is one of the reasons why a culture that cannot mediate a constructive dialogue between the generations will get caught in a gridlock that is very difficult to break away from. Disagreement between the generations is not a fault to be eliminated. It is a working condition. In a healthy society, it is conducted with affection and with the assumption that each side has something the other needs. When the disagreement curdles into contempt where the old treats the young as fundamentally unserious and the young treats the old as fundamentally unsalvageable, the work the pair was supposed to do does not get done. The young's seeing is dismissed before it can be sifted, and the old's judgement is dismissed before it can be applied. The culture falls back on whichever generation has the loudest voice and most leverage at the moment and whichever it is, the work the other was supposed to do will not get done.

Some of this you may have watched in your own life. There is, in many of the places you have been, a sense that the conversation between the older and the younger is not being conducted well. The older feel patronised by the younger, or not listened to, or written off as having nothing to offer. The younger feel patronised by the older, or not taken seriously, or told that their experience is invalid because they have not yet earned the right to speak. Both sides are partially correct in their grievance, and both sides, in being partially correct, miss the larger truth. The conversation is supposed to be hard. It is supposed to be uncomfortable. The two sides have different vantage points on the world and the unease of

bringing them into contact is not a sign that something is going wrong; it is the sign that the work is going on. What goes wrong is when the unease becomes contempt and the contempt cuts off the constant dialogue that is supposed to be taking place.

I want to draw your attention, now, to something you may not have given yourself credit for. You have already been adding to the conversation. Every choice you made about obeying the rules or to disobey them; to conform to the group or challenge the status quo; the way you drive; the career you chose - if you did - despite the small disappointment of the elder who had hoped for something else; that too would have been an addition. The conviction you arrived at on your own, against the inertia of where you grew up — that was an addition. The small kindness you extended to someone whose kind your formation had not predisposed you to extend kindness to — that would have been an addition. These are not small. They are the actual operation of the surplus I have been describing. They are what change is made of.

You may also have failed to add, at moments when adding was open to you. You may have laughed at someone who should not have been laughed at, because the room was laughing and the cost of not laughing felt larger in the moment than the cost of laughing. You may have stayed silent when speaking was warranted, because the speaking would have been awkward and the silence was easier. You may have chosen, in some small and unremarked way, to reproduce something that was given to you that you knew, even as you were reproducing it, that it would have been better not to reproduce. These too are part of your record. They are not unforgivable. In fact, they are extremely

common; almost everyone has them in considerable quantities. But they are real, and the work of becoming honest includes acknowledging that the moments of failure to add are also moments of formation — they form the version of you that will be on hand the next time the same kind of moment arrives.

This brings me to something I am going to say more about in the next chapter, but I want to introduce it here. Within any generation, in any people, there are a few people who carry a particular charge. They are the ones who, when the moment arrives, do not laugh at the victim. They are the ones who say in the meeting what no one else will say. They are the ones who refuse the work that should not be done. They are the ones whose small additions accumulate into something the rest of the generation can recognise, after a while, as a way of being that was not there before. These are not the geniuses of their generation, necessarily, or the loudest, or the most prominent. Most of them are obscure. What sets them apart is that they have, somehow, been so formed that they cannot pretend not to have seen what they have seen, and that the cost of pretending is, for them, larger than the cost of acting on what they have seen.

I do not yet know — neither of us does — whether you or I are that type of person. The question cannot be answered by us in advance. It will be answered, when the moment comes, by who you and I have been becoming across the unremarked days. What I want you to take from this chapter is the simpler recognition that you have been part of the work the whole time. You have been adding, even when you did not know you were adding, and your additions, however small, are part of how what was given to you will reach the people who come

after you. The chain does not pass through you neutrally. It passes through you bent into the shape that you are.

The next chapter is about the few who carry the charge — what they look like, how they are made, why they are needed, what it costs them, and the question of whether you might be one of them. We will not answer the question because you will not know the answer until the moment that asks it of you arrives. But we will look at what makes the answer go one way rather than the other, and at the modest, unspectacular work by which a person, across the years that no one in particular is watching, becomes the kind of person who answers it well.

5

The One Who Cannot Look Away.

There is a thought I have come back to often, that I first heard from someone older than me who had earned the right to put it this way. “The test of a generation,” he said, “is not what its most gifted members produce. The test of a generation is whether, when the moment came, there were enough people of ordinary gifts who refused to do the wrong thing.”

I want to spend this chapter on those people. They are the subject the rest of the book is, in one way or another, organised around, because everything else the book will say about how a household, an institution or a country either renews itself or falls into corruption depends, in the end, on whether this particular kind of person is being made in sufficient numbers.

You have probably been given a picture of them that is not quite right. The picture in your head, if you grew up on the usual heroic stories, is of someone exceptional — uncommonly brave, uncommonly perceptive, uncommonly equipped to see what others did not see and superhuman powers to act on what they saw. The picture flatters them and it flatters us, because if they are exceptional then we are not required to be like them; we are required only to admire them.

The picture is not quite accurate, and the accuracy matters, because the inaccurate picture lets a great many ordinary people off a hook that ordinary people are exactly the ones who need to be hooked on.

What such people have, more often than anything else, is not an exceptional foresight. They see what others see. They are in the room with everyone else; they notice what everyone in the room is noticing. The other people in the room have made a small accommodation with what they have noticed — an accommodation that lets them continue with the day. The accommodation can be enormously costly to make, but it is the accommodation almost everyone in the room has made, and the people who have made it are not, on the whole, contemptible. They are tired. They have children. They have a job they need to keep. They have learned, over years, that pointing out what is being noticed costs more than the noticing itself appeared to be worth. The accommodation is the route of ordinary survival in a place where survival is on the line.

The person who carries the particular charge is the one who finds, when the moment comes, that they cannot make the accommodation. Not that they will not. Not that they decide not to. They find they cannot, and the cannot is something deeper in them than a decision. They have been formed so that the cost of the accommodation, for them, exceeds the cost of refusing it. They cannot pretend not to have seen what everyone in the room has seen, because the pretending costs them something they are unable to part with. So, they speak, when speaking is costly. They refuse, when refusing is dangerous. They take in their hands a piece of work that no

one has assigned to them, because the work needs doing and they have lost the ability to walk past it.

This is not an exceptional ability or disposition. It is the unexceptional disposition for a person whose deepest formation has equipped them not to look away. The difference between them and the rest of the room is not what they see. It is what they are compelled to do with what they have seen.

I want to say something about the accommodation itself, because I have so far described it as if it were only the response of tired people to the cost of speaking, and that is not the whole of what is going on. The accommodation is, in many of the places where it is being made, also a bargain — the bargain I described in Chapter Three. The person who is making the small daily compliance is not only paying a present cost; they are accepting, in part of themselves, the bargain's promise that the going along now will, in time, allow them to be one of those whose presence in the room is what the next generation has to go along with. The junior employee who absorbs the dismissive treatment from her manager is also, in part of herself, registering how authority works in this place, and beginning to imagine the day on which she will be the one whose treatment of juniors will be absorbed without protest. The new recruit being toughened up by the seniors is being recruited not only into the present hardship but into the future entitlement that the hardship is supposed to earn. The young professional being formed in the brutal conditions of a particular vocation is being formed, also, into the expectation that having survived the conditions confers the right to inflict them on the next intake. The bargain is implicit. It is rarely acknowledged. But it does

much of the work of holding the room's accommodation in place across generations.

This is what the truth-bearer's refusal exposes, and it is why the room's resentment of the truth-bearer will be sharp. The truth-bearer is not only refusing the present accommodation; they are refusing the bargain that others accept as an investment toward future authority. By refusing, they expose the bargain to the people in the room who have been making it without quite letting themselves see what they were making. The exposure is unwelcome. The people in the room had been able to bear the present cost because they could tell themselves that the bearing was an investment; the truth-bearer's refusal asks them to consider whether the investment was, in fact, a participation in the very arrangement they were also paying the cost of. The question, if entertained, would require them to undo more than the present moment's compliance; it would require them to undo the architecture of expectation by which the cost of the compliance has been carried. They prefer not to undo it. They resent the person whose refusal would require them to forego the future promise of power and domination. The resentment is not, in most cases, conscious. It registers as irritation, as embarrassment, as a quiet judgement and condemnation of the truth-bearer's poor social skills or excessive moralism. That condemnation of the few who cause discomfort and inconvenience for the many is what allows the bargain to continue.

I want to be careful here, because there is a way of reading what I have just written that makes people who refuse the bargain seem morally superior to the people in the room with them, and that is not what I think is going on. The

accommodation the others have made is often, in a particular way, a sound piece of social wisdom. There are days when most of us cannot speak, because speaking would cost us more than we have to give that day. There are seasons of life when our reserves are low and our obligations are high and the small dishonesty of a laughed-at joke is the price we are paying for the energy to get through the week. We are not contemptible when we do this. We are merely surviving, and surviving has its own honour, especially when there are people who depend on us surviving.

But there are some people for whom the accommodation has stopped being available, and the unavailability is not a virtue they have cultivated either. It is simply something that has been laid down in them by their formation. The accommodation that seems to guarantee survival to the rest of the room is, for them, a death of a kind that costs them more than the kind of survival on offer is worth. They have been so formed that the pretending tears at something in them they cannot live without. So, they speak, and that speaking is not a brave act — it is the only act they are able to perform. They are not heroes at that moment. They are people whose formation has constrained them, narrowed their options, made them unable to imagine themselves doing what almost everyone around them are able to do. The narrowing is what we call their character, and the character is what gets called, after the fact and at a safe distance, courage.

Every generation, in every people, contains some of these. The number is small. It is not larger in any people than in any other; the difference between peoples is not that some breed more of them than others, but that some have built the kinds of institutions in which they can be useful and others have

not. In good conditions, they are protected enough that what they say at cost is heard at scale, and the costs they pay are bearable. In bad conditions, they are punished hard enough that the next would-be one of them learns to keep their mouth shut. The variable is the environment, not the people. Both the wheat and the chaff are in any generation; what changes is whether the conditions sort them out or grind them up together.

I want to spend a while on what happens when they speak, because there is a pattern here, and the pattern repeats with such regularity across the centuries that it is one of the most recognisable things I can place before you, and I want you to be able to recognise it.

When they speak — when they name what has been quietly going wrong, when they refuse to do what everyone else has agreed to do, when they take up the work no one had asked them to take up — they are not, in the first moment, received as the deliverers of an important message. They are received as a disturbance. The people around them — especially the people who have made the accommodation — will interpret what is being said, not as an insight or useful information but as an accusation. This is not because the speaker has accused them. Often the speaker has been at pains not to accuse anyone. But the speaking exposes the accommodation, and the people who have made it, feel exposed themselves. So naturally, their first response is not gratitude but irritation, or anger, or contempt, or a quiet but durable resolve to make the speaker pay.

This is one of the things you have probably watched at small scale already in your life. The colleague who said in the

meeting what everyone in the meeting had been thinking — they did not become, that afternoon, the colleague everyone respected. They became, often, the colleague who had embarrassed everyone, and they paid for the embarrassing in the small currencies that the workplace has: a cooling of the friendliness, a withdrawal of invitations, a slight shift in how their name comes up in meetings they are not in. To the friend who told you the hard truth about yourself — your first response, very likely, was not gratitude. It was a flush of resentment, and it may have taken you months to work back to where you could appreciate what they had done. These are small-scale versions of a structural pattern that, at larger scales, becomes lethal. The doctor who is hounded out of the profession for saying what the institution does not want said. The official who, having spoken once, finds that all the doors are quietly closed. The journalist who, in a country whose press has been bent, ends up in prison or in exile or worse.

There is a precise name for the gravest form of this pattern that I will introduce later in the book, when we have done the work of getting to it. For now, I want you only to recognise that the pattern exists, and that what happens to the people who speak is not, in most cases, what one would expect if the explicit story of the place was the actual story. The places where they speak almost always say of themselves, in their explicit story, that they value truth-telling, that they reward honesty and that they would want to know what is going wrong. The actual operations of the places almost always punish exactly the truth telling the explicit story claims to want. This is one of the most reliable patterns you can identify in any institution. Learning to see it for what it is and cultivating the patience and perceptiveness to identify when

and where the explicit story diverges from the actual story, by what margin, how that divergence persists and what price is paid by those who expose it is one of the more important skills the rest of this book will help you develop.

I have been talking about the speakers in terms that may sound grim. I want to balance that, because the grim version is not the whole of it.

What the speakers set in motion does not die when they are ostracised, exiled or killed. This is not a sentimental claim; it is an observable feature of the long historical record. The teacher who was fired for telling the school what the school refused to hear is forgotten, in many cases, by the school that fired her — but what she said is, after enough years, what the school finds itself teaching. The reformer who was driven out is, two generations later, the figure the country names a street after. The truth-teller who paid the cost in their own time turns out to have lodged something in the memory of the place that the place itself eventually grows into. The grandchildren of the people who would have stoned them are the ones teaching their own children the words their grandparents could not bear to hear.

This is one of the structural facts about how people change over time, that makes it possible to do the work without expecting to see the results instantly, or even in their own lifetime. The expectation that one will live to see one's truth-telling vindicated has been, for most truthtellers across history, a false expectation. They most often do not live to see it. In fact, they live, often, only to understand and pay the cost. But the lodging is real, and the dissolution of what they have lodged into the broader substrate is slow and patient and

largely invisible, and after enough time it produces effects that no one would have predicted in the lifetime of the person who initiated them. The arc of how things change is not the arc of an individual life; it is the arc of generations. To do the work is to act in faith, partly, that the work matters even though one will not see what becomes of it. That faith need not be blind. It is borne out by what has happened to other truth-tellers in other generations whose lodgings are now part of the air we are breathing. But it still requires a special kind of faith, in the precise sense that the doer cannot verify the outcome within the time they have.

I want to come, now, to you. You have been waiting, perhaps, for me to say whether you are one of these people, and I am going to say that I do not know. Neither do you. The question is not answered in the abstract. It is answered, when the moment comes, by what you have become across the unremarked days that preceded it. I have known people who would have laid odds on themselves to be the kind of person who acts when the moment comes, and who did not act when it came; I have known people who would have laid odds against themselves, who acted. The discrepancy is not random. The people who acted, when one looks closely at what they had been doing across the previous years, had been doing something the people who did not act had not been doing. They had been keeping, in their own daily lives, the saying and the showing and the doing in alignment with one another. They had been doing this often enough, in small enough matters, that the alignment had simply become who they were. So, when the larger moment came, they did the larger version of what they had been doing in the smaller ones. The people who did not act had been making, in their

own daily lives, the small accommodations that the rest of the room had been making, and the small accommodations had laid down in them the formation that, when the larger moment came, produced the larger accommodation.

This is, in plain terms, the thing this book is most concerned to say. The kind of person you become is laid down, mostly, by the small choices about what to say and what to refuse to say, what to laugh at and what to refuse to laugh at, what to look away from and what to insist on looking at, that you make in the days when no one is paying attention.

The unremarked days are not preparation for the moments that matter; they are in fact the moments that truly matter. By the time the moment that history will remember arrives, your answer to it has already largely been determined by the answers you have been giving for years to moments that history will never remember. This is not a discouraging thought, because the small daily moments are the ones you can still do something about. The large historical moment, if it comes for you, will find what it finds; you cannot prepare for it directly. What you can do is the work of the small days.

I want to leave you with two things at the end of this chapter, before the book turns, in its second movement, to the small dense places in which the work of the small days actually happens.

The first is this. You have been, at least once in your life, the person in the room who could not pretend not to have seen what the room was pretending not to see. You may not remember the moment as significant; most such moments are not significant in their own time. But it happened. You said the thing, or you refused the thing, or you took the small

action that the room had agreed to leave undone, and you paid something for it — even if the something was only a slight cooling of the room's friendliness, only a few uncomfortable minutes you would rather have avoided. That moment is in your record. It tells you something true about how the world works and what you are capable of doing in it. The question is not whether you are capable of it. The question is whether you can become the kind of person who is capable of it when the cost is real.

The second is this. The work of becoming such a person is not glamorous. It is not the work of preparing yourself to do something heroic. It is the work of refusing, in the next dozen small conversations you have, to say what you do not mean. It is the work of keeping, in your own conduct, the saying and the showing and the doing in alignment with one another, day by day, in the small matters that no one else will notice. It is the work of building, across years, the company of friends who will tell you the truth about yourself when you cannot see it; the work of staying in those friendships through the discomforts they require; the work of accepting, when the truth they tell you is hard, that they are doing something for you that you cannot do for yourself. It is, in short, the work of the rest of this book. The next movement is about the small dense places in which that work actually has to be done.

II
The Company We Keep

The work of becoming a person worth being is not done alone. It is done in small dense places and on foundations of relationships in which the truth can be told between two people, at workplaces that shape the workers more than the workers shape them and within institutions whose protective apparatus can turn against what they were built to defend. This part is about how character is built among others, and about how the company you keep makes possible, or makes impossible, what you can become.

6

The Three in Agreement.

There is a word the next part of this book has to do some work to recover, because the world has used it loosely for so long that the precision it once carried has been worn off. That word is trust.

In the loose sense, trust is a feeling. You trust the friend who makes you feel safe; you trust the doctor who has a reassuring manner; you trust the institution whose name you have grown up hearing said with respect. The trust runs on the texture of how being with the person or the institution feels to you, and the texture can be honest or dishonest with what is actually going on. A confident man, by definition, produces in his work the feeling of trust without any of the things trust ought to be tracking. A long-married couple may have lost, between them, the underlying conditions of trust years before either of them registered the feeling as gone. The loose use of the word lets the feeling float free of what should be giving meaning to it, and the floating is dangerous, because it makes the word useless for telling you when you are right to trust and when your trust is misplaced.

I want to do something more precise with the word. Trust, in the sense I am going to use it for the rest of this book, is not the feeling of it. It is a structural condition of the place

between two people, or among the members of a household or a workplace or a country. The condition is the agreement of three things you already know how to recognise — what is said in the place, what is felt in the place, what is done in the place. When these three are in alignment, the place is trustworthy in the strict sense; the feeling of trust, when it arises in such a place, is tracking something real. When the three are out of alignment, the place is not trustworthy, however good the feeling of being there may be, and any feeling of trust the place produces is a misreading that will eventually be corrected by the place itself.

You can take this as the working definition: trust is the warranted expectation that what a place says, what people in that place feel through their formation, and what a place does are the same thing. Trust is the name for the three being in agreement.

I want to put weight on the word warranted, because it is doing important work. There is a kind of trust that is given to a place without warrant — the trust that runs on hope, on habit, on the difficulty of imagining that anything could be otherwise. This trust is not the same kind of thing as the trust I am after, and confusing the two is one of the more painful experiences of growing up. People who trust without warrant are what we recognise as naive or gullible, and the place they are trusting will eventually teach them so. People who withhold trust from a place where the three channels have come apart are not cynical; they are reading the place accurately. Trust is something you can be right or wrong about, and the standard of being right is not in the feeling of trust but in the observed agreement of the three channels in what is being trusted.

This sounds harsher than I mean it. Let me come at it from the other side.

When you have been in a place where the three were in alignment, you know the texture of it. You may not have noticed the texture as such, because the texture of trust is largely the absence of the friction that distrust produces. You walked into the room without a quiet calculation of who was watching whom and what each of them was actually after; you took what the person across from you said as something you could act on without needing to verify it independently; you let the question rest where the person you asked said it rested, because the person had been straight with you before and you had no reason to think they were not being straight with you now. The mental work you were not doing — the constant background work of testing every statement against suspected hidden purposes — is what trust spares you. This kind of trust that can be observed is, among other things, an enormous economy. A place that has it can do work that a place without it cannot do at any reasonable cost.

You also know the texture of a place where the three are not in alignment. The conversation that runs on two channels at once: what is being said openly, and what is being said in the small movements of the face that everyone in the room is reading and no one is acknowledging. The favour that comes attached to a quiet expectation that no one will name. The institution whose proclaimed standards have to be navigated alongside its actual operating rules, and where the cost of mistaking one for the other can be high. You have probably lived inside one of these places. The texture is exhausting. The exhaustion is not from the work itself; it is from the double work — the constant additional layer of having to ask,

of every transaction, what the actual transaction is underneath the announced one.

If you have lived in such a place for long enough, you may have lost the felt memory of what the other kind of place is like, and you may have come to take the double work as the normal cost of living among others. It is not. It is the cost of living among others in the absence of trust. The other arrangement — the one in which the saying and the showing and the doing agree — was not invented for you in some other time and place. It is a possibility in any place where enough people are doing the work to keep the three in alignment. Where it is missing, it is missing because the work is not being done; where it is present, it is present because the work is being done. There is nothing fated about which kind of place you live in.

I want to spend some time on a feature of trust that, in my experience, people often have not been told about and that makes a great deal of difference to how they understand their own lives. Trust is asymmetric in how it is built and how it is lost.

It is built slowly. A place earns the warranted expectation of three-channel agreement only by demonstrating the agreement, in a sufficient number of independent encounters, over a sufficient duration. Not in one or two encounters but in many, across enough time and in enough varied circumstances, that the agreement has been tested under the kinds of pressure that would expose it if it were merely a charade. Trust is built by the unglamorous repetition of what is said and what is felt and what is done being the same — meeting after meeting, transaction after transaction and

season after season. A new place starts with no warranted trust available to it and therefore must earn trust in increments, and the increments will be small. The work of building it is uncongenial to anyone in a hurry.

But it is lost quickly. A single visible parting of the channels — a single moment in which the place is caught proclaiming one thing while doing another — can undo years of accumulated trust in a few hours. This is not because the people withdrawing their trust are unfair. They are doing exactly what the situation requires. They have received new information: the saying and the doing in this place have been shown not to agree, and the most economical reading of the new information is that the previous appearance of agreement was an illusion the place was capable of maintaining only so long as it was not stress tested. The accumulated record of agreement has not been falsified, exactly; but its meaning has been changed. What appeared to be reliable agreement of the channels may have been only the absence, until now, of any pressure great enough to force them apart. The place is now revealed to be the kind of place whose channels part under pressure, and that is a different kind of place from the kind whose channels held.

This asymmetry is not a quirk of human psychology. It is the structural reality of how trust works and its asymmetry is what makes a place's accumulated trust precious. Since building trust requires sustained work over time and losing it requires only a single visible failure; the asymmetry is what makes trust, once lost, hard to rebuild. The rebuilding cannot be done by saying the right things, because the saying is precisely the channel that has been revealed as untrustworthy. The rebuilding can be done only by doing, again, over a long

enough period and visibly enough, what the place has said it values — until the new pattern of doing has accumulated enough weight to outweigh the remembered moment of failure. This is slow. It is uncertain. It is, in many cases, never completed; the place lives, for a generation or more, in a condition of reduced trust that it has the materials to address but not the patience.

I want to introduce here something that the earlier chapters have prepared the ground for, but that the discussion of trust makes it possible to say cleanly. The kind of person you were warned about, in the last chapter, as the one who carries a particular charge — the one who says in the room what the room has agreed not to say, who refuses what the room has agreed to do, who takes up what the room has agreed to leave undone — that person, in the structural language of this chapter, is the person whose three channels in themselves have stayed in alignment. They have not let the saying and the doing in their own life come apart. They have done the daily work of keeping what they say and what they feel in their formation and what they do agree with one another, in their own small dealings, for long enough that the alignment has become the way they are. When the room is operating in misalignment, they cannot join it, because joining it would require them to violate the alignment they have painstakingly built in themselves over a period. Their refusal looks, from the outside, like courage. From the inside, it is the consequence of who they have become; and their intuition about the difficulty of rebuilding that coherent identity if they allow it to be betrayed even once.

This is one of the structural insights I most want you to take from this book, because I think it will spare you a great deal

of confusion about how character is actually built. Character is not, in any reliable way, a reserve of moral courage that you draw on in critical moments. Character is the cumulative alignment of your own three channels, built up by your own conduct in the small daily matters, until the alignment becomes what you are. When the critical moment comes, you do what someone of your character does, and the action seems to come out of you rather than being chosen by you. The choosing was done across the years that no one was watching. The moment that history will remember only completes what the unremarked days had already largely settled.

There is a converse to this, and it is uncomfortable. A person who has let their own three channels come apart, in their own daily life, builds in themselves the same condition they have been complaining about in the places around them. They have become a small instance of the same misalignment. When the critical moment comes for them, they will do what their own misalignment has equipped them to do; they will say one thing and do another, because that is what they have been training themselves to do, and the training will take over at the precise moment when the choosing cannot be deferred. The misalignment in the places around them gives them a continuous, plausible, almost convincing reason to make the same accommodation in themselves — everyone else does it; the times require it; there is no point holding to a standard the world has stopped honouring. The reason is not quite false. The world has come apart. But the reason is not a justification, either. The world coming apart is in part a consequence of enough people making the accommodation, as well as the condition under

which it most matters to keep one's own three channels coherent. The difficulty of doing so is part of what makes it the kind of work that matters.

I do not want to leave this chapter on the harshness of the last few paragraphs, because the harshness, by itself, will not produce what I am after. So, let me say one further thing.

Trust, between two people who have built it well, is one of the highest goods a human life can contain. The friend whose word you can count on, whose praise you can believe because they have shown they will withhold it when it is not warranted, whose criticism you can hear because they have shown they will offer it without contempt — such a friend is not a luxury. They are part of the scaffolding that is required to construct good character, and a life that contains a few of them is structurally different from a life that does not. The marriage in which the three channels agree is not a perfect marriage; no marriage is perfect. But it is a marriage in which the two people can do the work of living without doing also, every day, the additional work of decoding what the other is actually saying underneath what they are saying. The workplace in which the three agree is not a paradise; no workplace is a paradise. But it will be a workplace in which energy can go into the work rather than into the navigation of who is to be trusted with what.

These goods are not given. They are made, by the people who are in them, doing the slow work of keeping the saying and what is deeply felt and the doing in alignment. The making is largely invisible from outside; it does not produce dramatic effects you could point to as evidence of the work being done. What it produces is the absence of the friction

that misalignment produces, and the absence is hard to see until you have lived in its presence and then in the presence of misalignment somewhere else, and then you remember what you had and the remembering is enough to make you want to do the work of having it again.

There is something larger than trust at work in what I have been describing, and I want to shed light on it before this chapter closes. Every community of human beings depends, for its very existence, on a set of shared assumptions that the members of the community do not negotiate every morning before getting on with the day. The shared assumptions cover almost everything: what is real and what is not, what may be done and what may not, what counts as a serious claim and what counts as nonsense, what kind of clothing is appropriate in what kind of place, what subjects may be raised in what kind of company, what kind of conduct will be honoured and what kind will be quietly set aside. These shared assumptions are the air the community breathes. They are largely invisible to the people inside the community, who have absorbed them across the years of their formation and treat them as simply what is the case. They become visible only when someone comes into the community from outside, or when someone inside the community departs from them by a sufficient margin as to be noticeable. The departure produces, in the people who notice it, a particular kind of unease — the unease of having one's working assumptions exposed by a person who is no longer sharing them.

These shared assumptions are not optional, in the sense that no community has ever existed without some version of them. They are also not arbitrary, in the sense that not every set of shared assumptions can support a healthy common life.

Some sets of assumptions are better for the people who hold them; some are worse; some are catastrophic. The work of the community across generations is, in part, the work of refining its shared assumptions in the direction of better rather than worse — which is to say, in the direction of the assumptions that support the fullest common life their members can build together. The name for this work, taken at its most general, is ethics. Ethics is not the application of philosophical rules to particular cases, although there are philosophers who work that way and useful work they have done. Ethics, in the sense the book is using the word, is the slow shared labour of a community working out, across generations, which of its assumptions about how to live together are sound and which need to be corrected, and the labour is conducted in every household and every workplace and every conversation in which the assumptions are either reinforced or revised. What you have been doing in your life so far, in the small daily matters this book has been describing, is part of that labour. Your contributions to the labour are part of what your community is becoming. Your refusal to make a contribution, where contributions are warranted, is also part of what your community is becoming. Either way you are in it; you cannot opt out.

I want you to find, in your own life, the relationships and the places in which the three channels are aligned, and to register what those relationships and places have given you that you could not have got otherwise. Find them honestly. There may be fewer of them than you would have liked to have. If there are only one or two, the one or two are precious; if there are none, that is information about the conditions you have been living in, and the rest of this book will give you

some sense of what the work of building one would look like. Then find the places where the channels have come apart, and where the daily double work of living in misalignment is eating up energy you do not have to spare, and ask whether the misalignment is something you have any standing to address, or whether it is something you can only protect yourself against. The two are different problems and the rest of the book will give you tools for telling them apart.

The next chapter turns to one of the places where the work of alignment is most thoroughly done or most thoroughly undone — the work people do for a living, and what the doing of work does to the doer.

7

The Master.

You become, over the years, the kind of person your work makes of you.

This is not a sentimental claim about the dignity of labour, although there is something true under that phrase. It is a structural claim about how character is laid down across an adult life. The hours you spend doing your work are not neutral hours that leave you the person you were when you walked into them. They shape you. They lay down habits of attention you carry into your other relationships. They train you in certain kinds of small dishonesty or certain kinds of small honesty. They give you a sense of what counts as good enough and what does not, and that 'sense' carries over into the standards you apply to yourself outside the work, on matters the work was never directly about. By the time you have done a kind of work for ten years, you are not the same person who began doing it, and the differences between who you have become and who you would have become doing different work are not trivial, because the work has been working on you the whole time.

The most important thing to understand about this is that the work does its work on you not through what you produce — the spreadsheets, documents, lessons taught, patients seen,

meals served, goods delivered or buildings raised — but through how you go about producing them. The how is the channel through which work shapes the worker. The same nominal job, done in two different ways, makes two different people of the doers. The hospital ward where the doctors take time to listen to their patients makes a different doctor of you, across the years, than the hospital ward where the doctors have learned to cut the conversation short. The classroom in which the teachers prepare carefully for each lesson, even the lessons no one will be inspecting, makes a different teacher of you, across the years, than the classroom in which the teachers have learned that the inspectable lessons are the ones that matter. The market stall in which the trader keeps an honest weight, even when nobody is watching, makes a different trader across the years than the market stall in which the weights have been adjusted to favour the seller. The work, by the way the work is done, is laying down in the worker a way of doing things that the worker will, after a while, no longer recognise as a way they have chosen. It will simply be how they work.

This is, in the language of the earlier chapters, how you continue your formation in adulthood. You do not stop being formed just because people assume you are all grown up. The mechanisms change — you will no longer absorb the air of your parents' household — but the structure will be the same. There is a place you spend a great deal of your time in. That place has its own three channels: what is said about how the work is done, what is felt about how the work is done and why it matters, and what is actually done. You absorb the air of the place. You watch what is rewarded and what is not. You absorb, below the level of decisions, the place's actual

operating standards, which may differ considerably from its proclaimed standards. After enough years, the place's actual operating standards have become, in some measure, your own — and you are now reproducing them in your own conduct, sometimes against the explicit views you would offer if asked.

I have known people who would have laid odds on themselves to be the kind of doctor, or the kind of lawyer, or the kind of teacher, or the kind of engineer, that the dignified version of those professions describes. And I have watched what happened to them over fifteen years in workplaces in which the dignified version was not the actual operating standard. What happened is that they became, with great slowness and largely without registering it, the doctors or lawyers or teachers or engineers their workplaces produced. They did not become bad people. They became, in the small daily matters of their work, slightly worse versions of who they had set out to be — versions in which a certain corner was cut as a matter of course, a certain conversation was abbreviated as a matter of course, a certain standard was waived as a matter of course. The cutting and the abbreviating and the waiving did not feel, from inside their own experience, like compromises. The cutting and the abbreviating and the waiving felt like how the work was actually done in a real place, by adults who had grown up enough to stop being romantic about it.

This is the deepest danger of grown-up work, and you need to be told about it ideally before you have spent the decades inside it that make it invisible. The romantic phase of any vocation — the early years when you still hold the explicit standard up before you as the thing you are working toward

— is brief. The romantic phase ends, in most workplaces, when you have been in the place long enough to discover that the explicit standard is not the actual operating standard, and that holding to the explicit standard against the actual operating standard exacts costs from you that the people who have stopped holding to it no longer pay. The discovery is one of the most consequential discoveries of any adult life. What you do with it determines, in large part, what kind of practitioner you become.

The people who have made it through this passage well have done one of two things. Some of them have found, or built, a workplace whose actual operating standard is close to its explicit standard, and have stayed there. The number of such workplaces is smaller than people who do not work in them realise. That number is not zero, indeed they exist. More importantly, they are made by the sustained work of the people in them, of the same materials all workplaces are made of; just that they take serious effort to maintain it that way. People who have lucked into one early and have stayed are not, on the whole, more virtuous than people who have not. They are just those people who recognised what they had and refused to let it be eroded. Other people, not having found such a workplace, may have done something subtler. They may have kept, in their own conduct, the alignment they wanted the workplace to have, even when the workplace did not have it. They may have done their work to the standard they would honour if no one was watching, even when the workplace's actual operating standard would have let them off with less. They may have paid, often, the small daily costs of doing this, in the irritations and inefficiencies and occasional career setbacks that come from being the worker

who does the work at the standard the workplace claims but does not enforce.

Both of these are forms of the same underlying choice: not to let the workplace make you into a worse version of who you had set out to be. The choice is not glamorous. It produces no result anyone will ever applaud. It is also, in my observation, what divides the people who arrive at fifty as recognisable to themselves from the people who arrive at fifty wondering when exactly they stopped being the person they thought they were going to be. The arrival at fifty is not a single moment or choice. It is the cumulative consequence of tens of thousands of small ones, each of them mattering far less in itself than they all together turn out to have mattered as a whole.

I want to say something about the figure of the master and the apprentice, because something is being lost in many places about how this kind of formation actually works. I think the loss is worth describing because it is a vanishing practice and only those who have experienced it in their time and place would even know such a thing is even possible.

Most of what a person learns about how to do a kind of work is not learned by being told. It is learned by being close to someone who does the work, watching them do it across enough situations that the watching becomes perhaps the most consequential aspect of their formation. The apprentice does not absorb a syllabus of rules from the master. The apprentice absorbs a way of being a doer of this kind of work — the way the master moves through the workshop, the way the master responds when something goes wrong, the way the master treats the materials and the tools and the customers

and the time. After a few years close to such a master, the apprentice becomes a certain kind of practitioner. They do not need to consult the master in order to know how the master would respond, because the master is in them.

This used to be the way most vocations were learned, and in some places it still is. In many of the more credentialed professions of the modern world, the explicit training has expanded into years of school, qualifications, and rules and space for master-apprentice relationships have shrunk. These days young doctors are often shown the rules of medicine but spend less time close to an older doctor like whom they might become. Young teachers are given the techniques of pedagogy but rarely formed by years close to an older teacher whose way of being in a classroom they could absorb. Young traders are given the regulations of their trade but not closely watched by an older trader who would have set the limits the regulations cannot reach. The credential is supposed to do the work the apprenticeship used to do, and the credential cannot do that work, because the work is the work of absorbing a way of being and the credential transmits only the rules.

You have probably watched what happens to a profession that has lost its apprenticeship structure, without quite registering the loss - let alone be able to understand what was last or why. Often, this is because the proclaimed standards remain. The rules are still on the books. The qualifications are still earned. But the bend of judgement that the apprenticeship used to lay down in the young practitioner, such as the things the older practitioner would have done without thinking and would have corrected the younger practitioner for not doing, is missing. It is assuredly not the case that young practitioners are any less capable or lacking

in temperament. They are certainly not, in most cases, even consciously cutting corners. They simply have not been formed in the way that earlier generations of their profession were formed, and certain kinds of judgement that the formation used to produce are not available to them to be seen, imitated and exercised.

If you are in a vocation that is being learned now mostly through credentials and not through close apprenticeship — the way most vocations are — you should be aware of this. The credential may seem real, but it is also most assuredly not enough. You will have to seek, with some deliberateness and a lot more discernment, the older practitioners whose conduct you would want to absorb. You will also have to find ways to be close enough to them, for long enough, that the absorption can happen. They may not be your formal supervisors. They may not even be in your own institution. But they do exist. In most fields, they may be less prominent than their less-formed contemporaries, because the conduct that makes them worth absorbing also tends to keep them out of certain kinds of advancement; and they are usually willing to be watched, by a young practitioner who shows up regularly and asks honest questions. Finding one of them is one of the more important things a person can do early in a career, and the finding is rarely accidental. It takes looking.

I want to say something about a particular pattern that operates in the apprenticeship-like phases of many vocations, because the pattern is one of the more common ways in which a vocation's deepest corruptions also get reproduced across generations, and the pattern often hides itself as part of the formation rather than as a deformation of it.

The pattern is this. The young practitioner is, in the early years of their formation, subjected to conditions that the vocation describes as necessary to the production of a competent practitioner. The hours may be brutal, the casual cruelty of seniors may be pervasive, the impossible demands gruelling and rife with humiliations large and small that are presented as the rite by which the young become serious about the work. Young practitioners experience these conditions as suffering, which is what they are. But the young practitioner is, in many cases, also being offered the bargain — the one I named in Chapter Three, here taking a vocational form — that the suffering is an investment, that having endured it confers a particular standing that the vocation reserves for those who have endured it, and that the day will come when the young practitioner is the senior who is administering the suffering to the next intake of the young. The bargain is rarely stated in this language. It is shown rather than said, in the way the seniors carry themselves, in the small honours that the vocation extends to those who have survived the formation and in the casual remarks about how things were even worse in the speaker's day and yet how those who endured them are now all the better for it. Young practitioners are often amenable to absorbing this kind of bargain along with the suffering, and the absorption is part of what the formation produces — not only a competent practitioner, but a competent practitioner who has been formed to understand the brutality of it as a legitimate - if not necessary - part of their formation that they next generation should also be inducted into.

This is one of the structural mechanisms by which corrupt practices in a vocation reproduce themselves across

generations. The reproduction is not deliberate, in most cases. It is the operation of what those who have been formed by it understand to be the way the vocation is properly transmitted. The medical residents who endure unsafe hours and humiliating treatment become, in due course, the senior doctors who supervise medical residents in unsafe hours and humiliating treatment, and they often do so not from malice but from the conviction that the practice is what produced them as the practitioners they are, and that to soften it would be to fail the next generation. The same pattern operates in the formation of lawyers, of engineers, of military officers, of academics, of clergy and many other vocations. The pattern is so well-established that the people inside it have, in many cases, never seriously entertained the possibility that the vocation could be transmitted otherwise.

There is a moment in the formation of every practitioner of such a vocation when the bargain has to be either accepted or refused. The moment usually comes some years after the worst of the suffering has been endured, when the practitioner has reached a position from which they can begin to inflict on the next intake what was inflicted on them. The acceptance of the bargain, at this moment, is rarely a deliberate choice. It is more often a slow drift into reproducing what was done, justified by the same justifications that were used on the practitioner when they were on the receiving end. The refusal of the bargain, at this moment, must be a deliberate choice. It requires the practitioner to do something for which their own formation has not equipped them, which is to break in their own conduct, the pattern that their formation has installed and to do so at the cost of a certain standing within the vocation that the bargain would have conferred. This is a very difficult

choice to make and that is why that kind of refusal is uncommon. The few who make it are, in many cases, the practitioners whose conduct changes, slowly and across generations, what the vocation is. They are, in the strict sense, the people through whom a corrupted vocation finds its way back. They are also, in the present moment of their refusal, often criticised by their colleagues as soft, as failing to take the formation seriously, and as not preparing the next generation properly for the realities of the work. The criticism is the room's response to a refusal of the bargain that the room had accepted, and it is the same response the previous chapter described in the resentment that meets the truth-bearer.

If you are in the early stages of formation in any vocation, you should know that this bargain is being offered to you, and that the offer will become more attractive as you move further into the vocation and the prospect of being on the receiving end of it begins to give way to the prospect of being on the offering end. You should also know that you will, in time, reach a position from which you can either accept or refuse the bargain in your own conduct. The refusal is the work the vocation needs from you. The acceptance is the path of least resistance, and it is the path on which most of your contemporaries will move. The choice between them is one of the more consequential choices a vocational life contains. It is also one of the choices that is most invisible to the surrounding culture, because the surrounding culture has also been formed by the bargain and does not, in most cases, recognise the refusal as the moral act that it is.

I want to offer one more observation about the corruption of work, because in some places the question is not whether the workplace's actual operating standard is slightly below its

explicit standard but whether the workplace's actual operating standard has become something the explicit standard would condemn. The hospital that is in the business of managing the throughput of patients in a system whose economics require throughput; while telling itself it is in the business of caring for them, or the journalism whose actual operating standard is the production of content for an attention market; while telling itself it is in the business of informing the public are good examples of this. They are not malicious institutions in the sense that the people in them are largely not malicious. But the institutions have been bent, by long pressure, away from the work they claim and toward work of a different character, and the people inside them are being formed by the work they actually do rather than by the work they claim to do.

If you have worked, or are working, in such a place, you will have felt the strangeness of it — the way the explicit story of the place does not quite match what you spend your days doing, the way the language of the place's purposes feels slightly threadbare when you say it aloud, the way the things you are proudest of in your work are often the things the place's metrics do not reward. The strangeness is not a flaw in your perception; it is the registration of the gap between the explicit and the actual that the place has settled into and that the people in the place have largely stopped noticing. You are not crazy; the place is in a particular condition, and you are in a position to register the condition because you have refused to allow yourself to be entirely formed by it.

What to do about this is one of the larger questions of any adult life, and I am not going to pretend the question has a single answer let alone a simple one. Sometimes the right

thing to do is to leave; sometimes leaving is not available, or leaves the place worse than it was. Sometimes the right thing is to stay and do, within the place, the small daily work of holding to the standard the place claims to hold to, even when the place's actual operating standard is lower. The discrimination among these requires the kind of judgement the rest of this book will help you to develop, and the company of others who are exercising the same judgement under similar conditions. I want only, in this chapter, to make sure you have registered that the choice is yours, and that the way you make it is going to determine, over the long run of your working life, what kind of person your work has made of you.

Before we leave this chapter for the next one, on friendship and the company that makes the work of becoming a formidable person possible at all, I want to leave you with one observation about how to recognise a workplace, or a vocation, that is doing the work it claims to do.

Such places have, in them, a particular kind of patience about the long-term formation of their younger members. The older members of the workplace — not all of them, but enough — are visibly invested in the question of who the younger members are becoming, not only in the question of what they are producing. The older members make time, even when time is short. They tell the younger members hard things when the hard things are true. They are willing to endure the discomfort that comes with giving an honest assessment of a younger person's work, instead of the inflated assessment that would be easier and would keep the younger person more comfortable. They treat the younger members' development as part of the work, not as an obligation to be

discharged after the work is done. The presence of these features is, in my experience, the most reliable signal that a workplace is one in which the saying and the doing are still trying to agree. The absence of them is a signal that the workplace has given up on its own reproduction, and is now in the phase of using up the formation that earlier generations of its members brought into it from elsewhere.

You can tell, with practice, fairly quickly which kind of place you are in. The next chapter is about what you do when you have found out.

8

The Friend Who Tells the Truth.

No one becomes a person worth being on their own.

I want to put this plainly at the start of the chapter, because the surrounding culture will keep telling you the opposite, and the opposite is one of the more damaging things the surrounding culture will keep telling you. The story you have been given, from a thousand sources, is that becoming the person you want to be is a private project. You may have been told explicitly or implicitly that you must work out, in some interior space, who you mean to be, and you then go forth into the world to enact what you have worked out. The story flatters the self that is doing the imagined working out, which is part of why it has been so successful. It is also wrong about how the work actually gets done.

The work gets done in friendship.

I mean friendship in a particular sense. Not the sociable companionship of people who happen to enjoy each other's company, though that is a real and good thing; nor the affinity of those who share a hobby or a workplace or a stage of life, though those affinities can hold a great deal of weight; nor the warmth between people who have known each other a long time, though long acquaintance is one of the materials

friendship is built out of. Friendship in the sense I am after is the relationship in which two people, over a long enough time, have come to be able to tell each other the truth about each other. It is a particular structural achievement, and not all the people you spend time with are part of it, and it is what most people who have done the work of becoming a person mean when they speak about who helped them do the work.

The achievement is structural because it requires conditions that are not automatic. Most relationships, however affectionate, do not satisfy the conditions. The two of you have to have known each other long enough that you have seen each other across a range of moods, in conditions of pressure as well as of ease, in moments of generosity and moments of small failure. You have to have arrived at the place where neither of you is performing for the other anymore, because the need to perform has been worn off by time and trust and earned mutual respect. You have to have established, by a long enough record of having done it before, that you can say something difficult to the other without the difficulty being received as an attack on the relationship itself. The other has to have established the same about themselves. The relationship has to have survived, more than once, the test of having said something hard and having had to live together with the saying afterward. By the time these conditions are met, you have built something that is not common, and that the surrounding world will not, in most cases, help you maintain.

I want to spend some time on the test that I just named — the test of having said something hard and having lived together with the saying afterward — because I think the test is where most relationships that could have become

friendships fail to become them. The two of you are walking together along the path of an affection that has been deepening across a year or two or ten. The deepening has reached a point where the other person has done something, or said something, or settled into something, that you can see, with whatever clarity friendship has given you, is wrong for them — is going to cost them something, is incompatible with what they have said they want to be, and is the kind of thing they would not have done at an earlier moment of their lives. You know them well enough to see this. You are also old enough to know that saying so will cost something. The other person is invested in what they are doing, and they will not, in the first hour after you have said your piece, thank you for what you have said. They will, in some measure, resent the saying. The resentment may pass; it may also linger; it may, in the worst case, calcify into a quiet distance between the two of you that does not undo the friendship but takes some of the close air out of it.

Most relationships fail this test. The reason is not that one of the two does not see what needs to be said; the reason is that the cost of saying it has been calculated, more or less consciously, against the value of the relationship, and the value of the relationship has been judged not worth the risk of the saying. The judgement is rarely articulated in those terms. It is articulated, if at all, in evasions: it is not my place, they did not ask my opinion, they will work it out themselves, the timing is wrong, or I am probably reading the situation wrong. Each of the evasions has some weight. In many particular cases each of them is the right reading. But across enough such moments, in a relationship that could otherwise have grown into the deeper kind, the evasions accumulate

into a pattern and it is the pattern of an affection that has settled into the kind of comfort that no longer risks anything for the other's sake. The two of you go on liking each other, sometimes for the rest of your lives. You have, however, lost the possibility of the deeper relationship, and the loss is not registered as a loss because the comfort is real and the absence is only of a possibility neither of you ever quite reached.

The friendship that does pass the test has, by passing it, become something different from what it was before. The two of you now know, of each other, that the saying-something hard happened, and was lived through, and that the friendship survived. That knowledge becomes a solid structural foundation on which the enduring demands of a friendship can be built. You can rely, after this, on each other's capacity to say what needs to be said, and on each other's capacity to receive what needs to be said. The reliance is one of the more valuable structural facts a life can contain. It is what makes it possible, going forward, for either of you to bring up difficult things without first having to renegotiate the relationship's tolerance for difficulty. The work of saying the hard thing has been done, and the result of having done it is that further hard things can be said with less effort.

I want to be honest about the rarity of this. In any given person's life, friendships of this kind are very rare. Most people are lucky to have even a single friend who would be willing to risk the comfort of a cordial association and commit to doing the difficult and dirty work of exchanging uncomfortable truths, not just once, but as frequently as is necessary. Having two or three such friends would be a mark of an exceptional life. But most people pass through whole

stretches of life having none. The scarcity is not because most people are unwilling to be such friends to others. It is rather because the conditions take long durations to establish, and most people's adult lives have been arranged so that long durations of close contact with the same other person are difficult to come by. The pace of modern life and the patterns of modern career movement work against the conditions that this kind of friendship requires. The conditions can still be met, but they have to be sought with some deliberateness, and protected when they have been found.

There is a question worth pausing over here, because for many readers the person who most closely resembles what I have been describing — the one who has known you long enough and closely enough to say something difficult without the saying being received as an attack — is a spouse or a long-term partner. If you have such a person, the structural advantages of the position are real. They have watched you in more situations than any friend has. They have been with you in conditions where the performance most other people see has been worn off you. They have their own investment in your being the person you are trying to be, because your becoming that person shapes the shared life the two of you are conducting. In principle, no one is better placed than a spouse or partner to do the work of this chapter for you.

In practice, the position that gives the relationship these advantages also produces two difficulties that friendships outside the romantic frame do not encounter in the same form. The first is that in a marriage or a serious partnership, everything is received against the background of the relationship's overall stakes. A difficult truth from a friend can be received as difficult; the friendship carries it, but the

friendship is not itself in question. A difficult truth from a spouse comes into the room with the whole weight of the marriage behind it. The partner receiving the truth may hear it against a background that the speaker did not intend to invoke — a background of accumulated grievances, of unfinished conversations, of the small compressions of daily life that make everything harder to receive with an open hand. The truth may land more powerfully than it should, or it may be batted away because letting it land would put too much else at risk. Either way, the compression works against the kind of hearing the truth requires.

The second difficulty is that friends, when they have said the difficult thing, can walk away from each other and give the saying time to settle. Spouses cannot. They will be in the same house that evening, sharing the same bed, needing to conduct the small daily work of the shared life while what has just been said is still being metabolised. The metabolising has to happen in place, without the interval of separation that friendships have as their natural resource. This is harder than it sounds. Some marriages have the depth to hold the difficult conversation and the ordinary evening together; many do not, and the recognition that the ordinary evening cannot be maintained is what makes the difficult conversation harder to begin in the first place.

These difficulties do not mean the marriage or the partnership cannot do the work. Some do, and where they do the doing is one of the finer things a shared life can contain. But the assumption that any close romantic relationship will automatically do the work of the friendship this chapter is describing is often mistaken, and the mistake produces a sharper and more visceral pain. A person who has counted on

their partner for what the partner cannot in fact provide is left doubly short — without the friendship that could have done the work, and disappointed in the partnership that has not done it either.

We must also acknowledge the darker form of the difficulty, because it needs to be called out. The very features that make a partnership structurally suited for this kind of truth-telling — the long acquaintance, the shared stakes, the intimate access — are the features that, in a partnership that has gone wrong, allow one partner to inflict harm on the other under the appearance of offering difficult feedback. The words that sound, from outside, like the difficult truths a caring partner might offer can, from inside, be the instruments of a sustained diminishment that has nothing to do with truth and everything to do with the exercise of one partner's power over the other. The distinction from the outside is not always easy to see; from the inside it is often clearer than the person carrying the harm can afford to admit. If you are reading this and something has been stirring in you as you read it, I want to say only that what the chapter has been describing is not what an abusive partnership offers under the same name, and that the difference is not marginal. The friend who tells the truth leaves you more capable of the life you are trying to conduct; the partner who has been diminishing you under the language of honesty leaves you less capable of it, week by week, until the capacity itself has been eroded. If you have been on the receiving end of the second, please do not read what this chapter has been saying about difficult friendships as an argument that you should endure more of it. It is not. Getting away, when getting away is possible, is the honest response to that situation, and the

finding of the friendships this chapter is describing — the friendships that build you up rather than tear you down — will be part of what recovery looks like on the far side of it.

No matter how or where you find such friends though, the role and value of cultivating such deep and committed friendships is the single most important structural support you will need to be able to do the work I will be most concerned with in the second half of this book. Because the work of becoming the kind of person who, when the moment comes, does not look away — the work of staying aligned in oneself while the world around one is coming apart — is work that cannot, in most cases, be done alone. The pressures on a person trying to do this work are too great. The accommodations the surrounding world is making, and demanding of you to make, are too intense. The doubts that arise in oneself — am I seeing what I think I am seeing? Am I making more of this than is warranted? Am I being self-righteous in resisting what everyone else is doing without resistance? — are too consistent. A person trying to do this work alone, with only their own consciousness as their company, will, in most cases, lose, because the pressure of being alone with the work for long enough produces the doubt that produces the small accommodation that produces, across years, the slow erosion of who they were trying to be.

What sustains the work, where the work has been sustained, is the company of others who are trying to do the same work, who can tell each other when they are seeing things accurately and when they are losing perspective, and who can give each other the small reinforcements of company that the surrounding world is withholding. The dense, small, slow ties through which a particular way of being is reinforced often

enough to take hold within us, are the actual mechanism by which any new way of seeing has ever spread through a people.

The lone reformer at the front of a movement is a useful image, but the image is a catastrophically misleading one. The movement, when there is a movement, is the work of many people in small clusters reinforcing each other, and the lone reformer is the visible face of a larger and quieter network without which the lone reformer could not have sustained what they were doing.

This is a structural feature of how a new way of seeing has ever taken hold anywhere. The new way has to be repeated, by enough trusted voices, in enough places where trust has been built, to overcome the inertia of the settled household. The inertia of the settled household is not malicious; it is the working inertia of any place that has, by long use, arrived at how it does things. To dislodge it requires that the new way be presented not once, by one person, but many times, by people the household trusts, in the small intimate moments of daily life where the household's actual operating standards are reproduced or modified. The dislodging is done by the company. Without the company, the new way may be announced but it will not be taken up.

I want to bring this back to you. You have, in your life, a small number of relationships in which the truth could be told between you and the other person, if the work of telling it has been done. You also have, almost certainly, a small number of relationships in which the work of telling it has not yet been done, but in which the conditions are present — the duration, the trust accumulated in other matters, the affection

that would survive the difficulty — for the work to begin. I do not want to make these explicit. The reader of this book is not always the right person to initiate the difficult conversation, because sometimes the right thing to do, in a relationship that has been long but not yet deep, is to wait until the other person opens the door, and to walk through it when they do. But there are, in your life, doors that you have been near and opened to you that you have not walked through, and the not-walking-through has, in some cases, been a small failure of friendship that you knew at the time you were committing it. I want to ask you to take stock of those. Not to act on them yet because sometimes the stock taking is itself enough work for a season. But to note them as part of your account of what you have been doing with the relationships you have.

There is one thing I want to say about the receiving side of all this, because the receiving is harder than the giving in a way that is not always acknowledged. To be the recipient of a hard truth from a friend is one of the more difficult experiences an adult can have, because the recipient has to hold open the possibility that the friend is right, even though the friend's being right means that the recipient has been wrong in some way they had not yet seen. The defences are quick. The first response is almost always not gratitude. The first response will be some version of self-protection such as the inward argument against what has just been said, the marshalling of the reasons it could not be true, and the small noticing of all the ways the friend's view might have been distorted by the friend's own limitations. These defences are not a moral failure; they are the human response to having one's settled picture of oneself disturbed. What matters is

what you do after the first response has run its course. The friend has said the thing; the defences have been mounted; you have, now, the option of either letting the defences have the last word or letting the friend's statement sit, for long enough, that you can examine it without the heat of the first reception.

The work of letting the friend's statement sit is one of the more difficult interior practices an adult life can include. To be sure, that practice is not included in adult life automatically. It must be invited, cultivated and practiced. Counterintuitively, it requires a particular kind of holding back. The statement must be received and the immediate response will not only be defensive, but impatient and shouting to be heard. But the deferral of the response, for a day or two or a week, is the work the receiving demands of you most. Most people do not do this work. Most people respond, in the heat of having been told something difficult, with the response the heat produces, and the response, once delivered, closes off the possibility of the deeper hearing that the deferral would have produced. The friendship can recover from such a moment, but often what does not recover is the friend's willingness to say the next difficult thing, because the saying of the last difficult thing cost the friend more than the response repaid.

There is a particular version of this question that I want to raise, because it applies to a significant fraction of the readers of this book, and because the version is more pressing for them than they may have even thought to anticipate.

If you are the sort of person who has been rising, over the years of your adult life, in the arrangements you are part of

— moving up in your profession, taking on larger responsibilities, being given authority over more people or larger resources or more consequential decisions — the friendships this chapter has been describing are becoming, in equal measure, both more important and more difficult for you to maintain, and the two increases are not accidents. They are structural features of what happens to a person as they move up.

The importance is increasing for reasons that ought to be sobering. As you rise, the ordinary corrective mechanisms that would once have caught your errors begin to fall away. The colleague who would have told you that your idea was half-formed no longer feels free to tell you; you are now the person whose ideas the colleague is expected to support. The subordinate who would have shown you what you missed no longer shows you; showing you would risk consequences that showing you did not risk when you were their peer. The client who would have walked away from a poor product now stays, because the relationship has become worth something beyond the product. The failures you make cost you less than they would have cost you before, because the arrangements around you have accumulated buffers between you and the consequences your judgements would otherwise have to face. All of these compounds over time. The person who has been at the top of an arrangement for ten years is operating with a supply of corrective information that is dramatically thinner than the supply they were operating with in the early years of their career, and the thinning has happened so gradually that they have rarely noticed it happening.

Meanwhile, the changes in you have been running in the opposite direction of what would compensate for the

thinning. The person who has been rising has, in most cases, developed a heightened confidence in their own judgement, because their judgement has been treated by those around them as more trustworthy the higher, they have gone. The heightened confidence may be warranted in the domain in which it was earned but it also tends to spread into domains in which it is not warranted. Either way, the person no longer receives the kind of corrective information that would enable them to identify the boundaries of their judgement or its errors. So, eventually they will come to trust their own reactions in matters where their reactions are, in fact, not particularly reliable. They will come to expect a kind of deference in ordinary interactions that they would not have expected earlier in their lives, and the deference, when it is given, justifies their expectation, and the confirmation compounds.

This is where the difficulty enters. The friendships this chapter has been describing require two things that the rising person's condition works against. The first is that the person must be genuinely receptive to being told what they do not want to hear. The rising person's condition tends to make them, at best, resistant to such telling and, at worst, hostile to it. The people around them who might have been such friends learn quickly what kinds of telling produce what kinds of response, and they adjust. The adjustments are often not conscious. The friend who was once willing to say the difficult thing begins to soften it, not because they have stopped seeing what they saw, but because the cost of saying it in the older direct form has been rising, and softer forms are being received with less resistance and are therefore doing more of the work than the older direct forms would have

done. The friend has, in other words, begun to calibrate what they offer to the demeanour they are now receiving, and the calibration is one of the things the kind of friendship this chapter has been advocating for does not survive.

The second thing the friendship requires is that the two parties be, in some meaningful sense, peers. Not peers in every dimension — the friendships this chapter has been describing can hold across differences in age, expertise, wealth, and public standing — but peers in the sense that neither is structurally dependent on the other's continuing favour for the material conditions of their life. When the rising person's advancement has produced a situation in which the people close to them are, in some measurable way, dependent on their continued favour, the peer condition has failed, and the friendship cannot be conducted in the form the chapter has been describing. The former friend may still be a friend, in the sociable sense. They cannot be the friend who tells the truth, because the cost of telling the truth is no longer bearable to them, and both parties know it.

The rising person's task, if they want to keep the kind of friendship this chapter has been describing, is therefore twofold and both parts of it are very difficult. The first part is to work against, in their own conduct, the changes that their rising has been producing in them — to receive difficult telling with the same openness they received it with earlier in their career, to notice when they are treating their own irritations as signals from the world, to hold their own judgements with the modesty they warrant rather than the confidence the arrangements around them are inviting. The second part is to protect, and where necessary to construct, relationships with people who are not dependent on their

continued favour and who therefore retain the freedom to say what they see. These are usually people from earlier in the rising person's life, before the rising had progressed far enough to have altered the relational conditions. These are usually friends from school or from the early years of a career or from the family. If those relationships have not been maintained across the years of progression and accumulation of power and status, they have to be rebuilt, and the rebuilding may be much harder than the maintaining would have been. If they have been maintained, they are among the most valuable things the rising person still has, and the maintenance of them is one of the more important pieces of ongoing work an ambitious life should include.

This is the practical reason why the work of becoming a person worth being is so dependent on the small number of relationships in which the work can be done. Each such relationship is a slowly built mechanism for receiving the kinds of correction that you cannot reliably administer to yourself. Each such relationship that is lost or never built, leaves you to a degree impoverished and left only with the tools of self-correction that is, for most people, not sufficient. Deep and truth bearing friendships are not luxuries. They are part of the structural arrangement by which any person who has done the work of becoming a person worth being has done it.

The next chapter turns to one of the hardest patterns to see in any institution or country, and one of the most important to learn to recognise. It is the pattern in which the people and institutions that are tasked with the defence of what is good, has by long degradation, lost the capacity to tell what is good

from what threatens it, and now strikes hardest at what it is most needed to protect.

9

The House Against Itself.

There is a pattern I want to make sure you are able to see in this chapter that, once you can see it, you will start to see in places you have known and could not previously make sense of. The pattern is one of the hardest things to see while you are inside it, because it is built out of the very materials that are supposed to protect you. It is also one of the most important patterns to learn to recognise, because a great deal of harm in the world is done by it, by people who believe with a clean conscience that they are defending what they are in fact destroying.

The pattern is this. An institution — a household, a school, a workplace, a religious community, a profession, or a country — has, over time, built up a set of mechanisms for defending what it cares about most. The mechanisms exist for good reasons. The household has its discipline; the school has its rules and its disciplinary procedures; the workplace has its policies and its investigations; the religious community has its discipline of members and its disciplining of leaders; the profession has its boards and its ethics committees; the country has its police and its courts and its security services. These mechanisms are not, in themselves, the problem. Every group of people living together needs ways of defending what

they have built, because without such ways, what they have built does not survive long. The mechanisms are part of the working equipment of any sustained common life. The question - if there is one that still requires closer examination - is how much of this function can be outsourced to specialised groups with exclusive mandates and how much of it must remain a shared responsibility of all constituents.

Whatever the mechanisms are, they can lose, by long degradation, the capacity to tell the difference between what they were built to defend against and what they were built to defend. When this happens, the mechanisms will still continue to operate — they do not stop functioning; in fact, they continue to function with great energy — but they begin to fire at the wrong things. They fire at the people who are doing the work the institution most needs done and protect what the institution claims to be fighting against. They expend the institution's defensive energies in the wrong direction, and the institution becomes, by the operation of its own protective apparatus, the agent of its own corruption.

This is the pattern I want you to learn to recognise. It does not present itself, from inside the institution, as a corruption. From inside, it presents itself as defence. The people operating the mechanisms believe, in most cases sincerely, that they are protecting what they are charged with protecting. They are doing the work they were appointed to do; in the way they have been trained to do it. They are following procedures and exercising the judgements their predecessors exercised before them. The misfiring is not visible to them as misfiring. The teacher who is being driven out, the priest who is being silenced, the journalist who is being hounded, and the doctor whose career is being ended

are, in the institutional perception, threats that the institution's defences are correctly identifying and addressing. The defenders cannot see what is happening, because their seeing has been formed by the same process that has produced the misfiring; they are operating, with full integrity by their own lights, an apparatus whose calibration has come apart in a way the operating cannot detect.

We must give the pattern a name, because naming a pattern is one of the more useful things you can do for yourself when you are trying to see something new. The name I want to use is borrowed from the body's own version of this pattern, which doctors will recognise. There is a class of diseases in which the body's immune system, which exists to defend the body against threats, loses the ability to distinguish the body's own tissues from foreign invaders. It begins to attack the body itself; with the same vigour it would direct at a real invader. The diseases that result from this are debilitating, and they have a particular structural character: the body is being injured not by an external attacker but by its own defensive apparatus, which is doing what it was built to do but doing it against the wrong target. The diseases are called auto-immune diseases, and the name is precise. The body is being immune against itself.

The same pattern operates in institutions. An institution can develop, by a long process of degradation, the institutional equivalent of an auto-immune disease. Its protective apparatus begins to attack the parts of the institution it most needs to protect, while leaving the threats it was built against to operate freely. The institution is then, in the strict sense, being injured by its own defences. The injury is harder to address than ordinary corruption, because ordinary

corruption can in principle be exposed by the institution's defences. The auto-immune corruption is being carried out by the defences themselves, and there is, by definition, no internal mechanism for the defences to defend against their own misfiring.

I want to spend some time on how this kind of degradation actually happens, because the explanation will help you recognise it when you encounter it, and the recognition is what will allow you to take an honest measure of which institutions in your life are operating in this condition and which are not.

The degradation begins, usually, in a particular way. The institution, at some earlier point, faced a real threat. The threat was correctly identified by the institution's defences, and the defences responded, and the institution survived. The institution chose what to learn from that episode and what it learned persists as a memory of what the threat looked like, a calibration of the defences to be sensitive to threats of that kind and a set of procedures that had proven effective. The lesson that was learnt becomes an institutional asset; institutions must indeed learn from their own experience, but various parts of the institution can learn different lessons from the same experience and what they learn is often coloured by specific interests and divergent perspectives.

The resulting calibration that remains within the institution remains, in important ways, specific to the kind of threat the institution faced and how it was perceived and analysed. It will be most effective at helping the institution recognise threats that look similar to the earlier threat. As the years pass and the institution's circumstances change, the threats facing

it begin to take different shapes, and the calibration becomes less and less well-matched to the new shapes. The defences are still firing, but they are firing on the basis of patterns drawn from the older threats, and the new threats — which may not look like the older ones at all — are passing under the defences without being detected. Worse, the defences are increasingly detecting, as threats, things that share surface features with the older threats but are not in fact threatening. The calibration has become, in the precise sense, paranoid. It is over-sensitive to a particular pattern and under-sensitive to everything else.

This is one of the structural reasons institutions tend to fight, with great vigour, the last war rather than the current one. The institutional defences were calibrated against the threats of the last era, and they continue to operate on that calibration even after the threats of the current era have changed. The defenders are, by their own measure, doing exactly what they should be doing. They are also, by an outside measure, doing damage to the institution they are charged with protecting.

A particular form of this degradation deserves a closer look, because it is the form that does the most consequential damage. The defenders of an institution can, by long operation of their defensive function, develop a particular vulnerability: they come to perceive any criticism of the institution as an attack on the institution. The vulnerability is understandable. Most criticism of an institution is, in fact, mixed in its intent — some of it comes from people who want the institution to do better, some from people who want the institution to be weakened or destroyed. The defenders, having been trained to identify threats, have a hard time

distinguishing the two, and they tend, under pressure, to default to treating all criticism as if it came from the second source. This default is, in some cases, a costly mistake. The criticism that comes from people who want the institution to do better is the institution's most valuable signal — it is, in many cases, the only available indication of where the institution is going wrong. To treat such criticism as an attack is to silence the signal the institution most needed to hear.

What happens then is one of the more reliably destructive sequences in the life of any institution. The critic who wanted the institution to do better is identified as a threat and treated as one. The treatment is generally not subtle: the critic is marginalised, denied resources, denied advancement, removed from positions of influence, and sometimes expelled altogether. Other potential critics watch what has happened and learn, without anyone having to instruct them, that the cost of offering similar criticism is high. So, they fall silent. The institution thus loses its supply of internal critics, who were the people who would have told it where it was going wrong. The institution continues to operate, but it is now operating without the corrective feedback it needs, and the absence of the feedback means it cannot detect the direction in which it is drifting. The defenders, meanwhile, congratulate themselves on the effectiveness of their defence. They have, after all, neutralised the threats they identified. They cannot see that the neutralisation has cut the institution off from precisely the information it needed in order to remain healthy.

You may have watched this sequence unfold somewhere in your own experience. It could be a teacher who kept highlighting problems a school did not want to address, or a

priest who was quietly moved to a less prominent position because the priest's preaching was making the members of the congregation uncomfortable, or a journalist who was disappeared or killed because the work was annoying the people whose actions were being exposed and whose decisions were being criticised, or the comedian who got cancelled because he spoke truth to power in a manner that cut through the defences of a government's propaganda machine.

These small institutional cleansings happen all the time, in places of every size. They are mostly invisible from outside, and the invisibility is part of the problem. By the time the cleansings produce externally visible consequences, the institution has often deteriorated past the point where the consequences can be reversed without a much larger effort than would have been required earlier.

I want to introduce one further feature of the pattern that, I think, will help you recognise it even more precisely. Institutions in this condition tend to develop a particular tone in how they speak about their critics. The tone is one of injured incomprehension. The critic is treated as if their criticism is not just wrong but baffling — as if it could come only from a failure to understand what the institution is actually trying to do. The defenders cannot quite credit that the critic is acting in good faith, because if the critic were acting in good faith, they would not be saying what they are saying. The criticism must therefore be coming from some other motive — bad faith, personal grievance, ideological derangement, or the influence of outside forces — and the defenders devote considerable energy to identifying the

motive that explains the criticism without requiring the defenders to take its substance seriously.

This is one of the clearest signs of an institution stuck in an autoimmune condition. Watch for it. When an institution responds to a sustained piece of internal criticism not by engaging the substance of what the critic is saying but by speculating about what could have led the critic to say it, the institution has tipped its hand. It has revealed that its defensive apparatus is, in this moment, in the misfiring mode. It is operating against the critic as a threat to be neutralised rather than as a source of information to be considered. The substance of the criticism may be right or wrong; the institution's failure to engage it on the substance is, by itself, evidence about the condition of the institution.

There is something further about how the misfiring reproduces itself across generations that I want to describe, because it explains a great deal about why these institutions are so resistant to correction from within. The people operating the defensive apparatus, in many cases, were most likely themselves once on the receiving end of it. They were the junior members of the institution who watched, in their own early years, what happened to those who raised the questions the institution did not want raised. They absorbed, from that watching, both the lesson that raising such questions was costly and the implicit promise that those who survived the early years without raising them would, in time, become the seniors whose authority the next intake would have to accommodate. The promise was the same bargain that the previous chapter on work described in vocational formation. Institutions operate on the same bargain, but at larger scales. The young members are formed in the

substrate-conditions of an institution that punishes the kinds of criticism it cannot tolerate, and the formation includes the implicit expectation that the punishment will, in due course, be administered through their own hands rather than imposed on them.

When the moment arrives at which the formed members reach positions from which they can either continue the pattern or refuse it, the bargain that was implicit in their formation becomes the standing condition of their senior service. They have spent fifteen or twenty years paying the cost of compliance with an apparatus that they did not, in their early years, have the standing to challenge. The compliance was bearable because it was understood as an investment. To now use the position the investment has secured for them, against the apparatus that produced it, would be to declare that the investment was, in fact, a participation in something the senior has now come to see as wrong. The declaration would invalidate, in the senior's own account of their life, the decades of compliance that brought them to where they are. Most seniors are unwilling to make this declaration. They prefer to continue the pattern. They tell themselves, in the privacy of their own conscience, that they would have wished things were otherwise, but that the institution's needs require what the institution has historically required, and that the cost of disruption would be greater than the cost of continuity. The misfiring continues, not because each senior is independently malicious, but because each senior is independently invested in a pattern of compliance whose justification and meaning depends on the pattern being perpetuated.

This is one of the reasons that institutional reform from within is so much harder than the outside observer expects it

to be. The seniors who are in a position to address the misfiring are also the seniors whose entire life within the institution has been a long acceptance of the bargain. Their reproduction of the autoimmune condition is what earned them seniority in the first place. So, they are not, in most cases, willing to expose their own service as a participation in something they would now want to dismantle. The few who do declare it — the seniors who, late in their service, break with the institution they have been part of for decades and name what they have been carrying along with are uncommon, and they pay heavily for breaking that implicit contract. The institution treats them as it treats any other critic, with the additional energy that the institution reserves for the apostate. The treatment is part of why so few seniors break. Those who would have broken have watched what happened to the few who did.

I want to say something here that may be unwelcome but that I think you need to hear. The institution does not have to be wholly corrupt to exhibit the pattern; the pattern can be operating in particular regions of the institution while other regions remain healthy. But most institutions you will deal with in the course of your life will have some degree of this misfiring built into them. The conditions that produce it are very common because it is the most likely result when a group of people collaborate in their default mode.

Few institutions are wholly in this condition and few are wholly free of it. What you have to learn to do is read where, in any given institution, the misfiring is operating and where it is not, and to make your decisions about how to relate to the institution on the basis of an accurate reading.

Reading it accurately is not easy. It requires, in particular, that you not give the institution credit for being healthy just because it says it is healthy - either in its prospectus or in its balance sheet. The institutions in the worst misfiring condition tend to be the loudest about their own integrity. Their explicit story includes elaborate self-descriptions of their commitment to truth-telling, their respect for dissent, and their welcoming of difficult voices. The explicit story is, by itself, evidence of very little. What matters is the actual record: who has been promoted in the institution and who has been quietly pushed out, what kinds of criticism have been engaged on the substance and what kinds have been responded to by speculation about the critic's motives, what happens, in the small daily operations of the institution, to people who say things the institution would prefer not to hear. The actual record is harder to assemble than the explicit story, and the institution will rarely volunteer it to you. You have to put it together yourself, often from fragments, by paying close attention over time.

I want to leave this chapter with one observation about what you can do when you have identified that an institution you depend on is in this condition.

There is a temptation, when you have seen the pattern, to make a kind of total judgement about the institution — to conclude that, since the misfiring is present, the institution as a whole is unsalvageable, and that the right response is to distance oneself from it as fully as possible. The temptation has some force. There are institutions so far gone that staying inside them has costs no honest person should pay. But the temptation is usually wrong in the moderate cases. The misfiring is usually concentrated in particular parts of the

institution, while other parts are still doing the work the institution was built for. All the doctors in a corrupted hospital are not necessarily corrupted doctors. All the teachers in a failing school are not failing teachers. All the officials in a captured agency are not captured officials. The work of distinguishing the parts of the institution that are still functioning from the parts that are misfiring is patient work, but it is the work that lets you act intelligently rather than from a generalised disillusion. It also lets you be useful to the people in the still-functioning parts, who are usually the people most under pressure from the misfiring and who could use a colleague who can tell the difference.

The next chapter is about the three different kinds of resistance you will meet as you embark on the work of trying to change a place that has settled into something wrong. It is, more pertinently, also about why treating them as all the same kind of resistance is the error that has undone more honest reformers than perhaps any other.

10

The Three Resistances.

The work of trying to set right something that has gone wrong in a place is harder than the people who have not done it tend to assume. It is not harder for the reasons that get talked about most, which have to do with the courage required to begin. It is harder for a reason that gets talked about less, which has to do with the discrimination required to continue. Once you have begun, you will meet resistance, and the resistance will not be of one kind. It will be of three quite different kinds, and they will be intermingled in the same encounters and sometimes in the same person, and the work of telling them apart is one of the most important pieces of equipment you can carry into the doing of the work.

I have watched, more than once, an honest reformer come to grief not because the reform was wrong, not because the courage failed, but because the reformer could not tell the kinds of resistance apart and ended up treating all the resistance as the same kind. The kind they assumed it to be was usually the worst kind which also happened to be the kind they were most prepared to fight. They fought it. They fought against the people who were not, in fact, offering the kind of resistance they assumed it was. Many people they fought had a capacity to be won over, not only to end their

resistance but even to share the burdens of the reform. But once the reformer decided to fight them, they lost their willingness to be brought along, and the reform died not from the opposition of its enemies but from the alienation of the people who should have been its supporters. This is one of the structural patterns by which good work often gets defeated, and it is mostly self-inflicted. That is why the ability to discriminate between the three kinds of resistance is so important.

I want to take the three kinds in order, beginning with the one that is most often misread.

The first kind of resistance comes from people whose lives are bound up in the arrangements you are trying to change. They are not corrupt. They are not, in any normal sense of the word, defenders of injustice or inefficiency or waste of corruption. They are people who, in many cases over the course of decades, have built lives that depend on the arrangements as they are. The carpenter who spent thirty years learning to build a frame that a new safety regulation will require to be built differently. The official whose dignity rests on a custom that the new arrangements will eliminate as waste. The shopkeeper whose modest income depends on a trade that the new arrangements will restrict or reroute. The analyst who has become indispensable in the team because of an Excel tool that he had spent years building and refining, that will be superseded by a new system. These people, when they resist what you are doing, are resisting the loss of lives they have built. They are not contemptible in their resistance. They are defending something that any honest accounting must register as having been worth building, and that the change you propose will, by no fault of theirs, threaten.

The first thing to say about this kind of resistance is that you owe the people who carry it a particular respect. Their resistance is not the resistance of the wicked or the corrupt; it is the resistance of human beings to the disruption of lives they have invested in. If your reform requires that the disruption proceed — and many real reforms do require it — the disruption is not free, and the cost it imposes on these people should not be discounted in your moral accounting just because the reform is, on the whole, just or even essential. The carpenter does not deserve to be told that his thirty years of skill have suddenly become valueless because the world has moved on. The analyst does not deserve to have his ingenuity and innovation dismissed as wasted effort or his special status in the team undermined. These people are paying a price for a change that is largely not of their making and largely not in their interest. The least they are owed is the honest acknowledgement that they are paying it.

The second thing to say is that this kind of resistance is, in most cases, workable. You are not in adversarial relation to these people, even if it sometimes feels as if you are. You share with them an interest in the well-being of the community to which they belong, and the well-being of that community includes the well-being of the lives they have built within it. A reform that finds ways to honour what they have built — that finds ways to use their accumulated skill in the new arrangements, that finds ways to preserve their dignity in the transition, that finds ways to give them a stake in the outcome rather than treating them as obstacles — has, in many cases, the materials for bringing them along. The bringing may not be quick. It will likely require patience, and listening, and taking seriously the things they are telling you

about what your reform will cost. Sometimes what they tell you is information that should modify the reform. Sometimes it is information that should change the pace at which the reform is implemented. Sometimes it is information about a kind of cost you had not accounted for and have to find a way to absorb. Listening to them is not a weakness. In the least, it is an essential step towards ensuring the reform gets to be the kind of reform that does not generate, by its own conduct, the opposition that defeats it.

I have laboured this point because the temptation, when you are in the early enthusiasm of trying to change something, is to treat these people as obstacles to be overcome rather than as fellow members of the place whose objections deserve a hearing. The temptation has produced more failed reforms than perhaps any other single error, and it has alienated more people who would otherwise have been your allies than any other single error. The temptation is to be resisted. The carpenter is not your enemy. The carpenter is a person whose life will be disrupted by what you are trying to do, and the disruption is real, and the carpenter's resistance is the human response to having one's life disrupted. Treat it as that, and you will often find that the carpenter, given enough time and enough honest engagement, becomes one of the more useful members of the eventual coalition that brings the reform across.

The second kind of resistance is different in kind. It comes from people whose interests are served by the arrangements you are trying to change — not because the arrangements gave them a life they built honestly, but because the arrangements give them an advantage that is, in some way, taken from others. The moneylender whose income depends

on the desperation of the borrower. The owner whose profits depend on wages held below what the labour is worth. The official whose position depends on the kickback. The faction that has, by some sequence of historical accidents, come to occupy a position from which it extracts a benefit it has not earned and would not survive a fair competition. These are not people defending lives they built; they are people defending advantages they have accumulated by means that would not bear close inspection.

The first thing to say about this second kind of resistance is that it has to be called out for what it is. The conflation of this kind of resistance with the first kind is one of the more reliable rhetorical moves used by those who want to defeat reform, and it works precisely because the first kind exists alongside it. The interests that depend on unjust advantage will, in many cases, deliberately put forward the interests that depend on honestly built lives, and ask the reformer to acknowledge those interests, and then take the reformer's acknowledgement of the legitimate interests as cover for the protection of the illegitimate ones. The reformer who cannot tell the difference between the two will find that their patience and their willingness to listen, which were the right disposition toward the first kind of resistance, are being used to protect a second kind of resistance that the patience and the listening do not, in fact, deserve.

The discrimination here is not always easy. The same person may carry both kinds of interest, and the proportions may be hard to assess. But the discrimination has to be attempted, because the appropriate response to the two kinds is different. The first kind is to be engaged in good faith; the second kind is to be named and resisted. To engage the

second kind in good faith is to allow oneself to be exploited; to name and resist the first kind is to make enemies out of potential allies. The reformer who has done the discrimination well can negotiate with the first kind and contest the second, and the work can go forward on both fronts in the way the work needs to go forward. The reformer who has done the discrimination poorly will, in many cases, do the opposite of what is needed in each case, and the work will founder.

The third kind of resistance is the one that is hardest to address and the one that does the most damage, and I want to spend the rest of the chapter on it.

The third kind of resistance comes from people whose formation has taught them, often across many years and through many channels at once, to call wrong what is right and to call right what is wrong. They are not acting from the defence of honestly built lives. Nor are they fighting to protect unjust advantages. They are acting from what they believe with their whole hearts to be the defence of what is good against what is threatening it. The wrong they would do, to the people the reform is supposed to help, they would do with full conviction that the wrong was right. The harm they would inflict, on the people who are trying to do the work, they would inflict with the satisfaction of having performed a difficult duty well. They have been so formed that the very things the reform is trying to address have come to feel, to them, like the things the reform is attacking. The reform is, in their formation, a threat to what their formation has taught them to value, and they will resist it with all the moral seriousness they bring to anything else in their lives.

This is the gravest of the three kinds of resistance, for a precise reason. It cannot be ended by appeal to the consciences of those carrying out the resistance, because their consciences are clear. They are not acting against their own better judgement because their better judgement is what is producing the resistance in the first place. The reformer cannot reach them by demonstrating the wrong of what they are doing, because the demonstration uses categories that their formation has taught them to read differently. The reformer cannot persuade them through argument, because the argument depends on premises their formation has taught them to reject. They are operating, in good faith, from a formation that has put them on the wrong side of what justice requires, and the wrongness of the side is not visible to them from within the formation.

The historical record is full of this. The people who burned the heretics were not, in most cases, conscious sadists; they were people whose formation had taught them that the burning of heretics was a duty they were required to perform to protect the souls of the people who would otherwise have been led astray. The people who carried out the laws of segregation in the American South were not, in most cases, conscious villains; they were people whose formation had taught them that the laws preserved a social order whose dissolution would be catastrophic for everyone, including the people the laws were oppressing. The people who informed on their Jewish neighbours under the Nazi regime were not, in most cases, conscious betrayers of decency; they were people whose formation had taught them that the regime was restoring a moral order their society had been losing, and that the laws against the Jews were a regrettable but necessary

part of that restoration. The people who did these things believed, with their whole hearts, that they were doing right. They were wrong. But they were not wrong in the way someone is wrong who has been caught in a deliberate lie. They were wrong in the way someone is wrong whose formation has installed an error so deep that they cannot see it as an error at all.

This is the kind of resistance the reformer must learn to recognise, because the temptations in dealing with it are particularly dangerous. There is a temptation to treat the people carrying this resistance as if they were carrying the second kind — as if they were defending advantage in bad faith — and to fight them with the energy that fighting bad-faith defenders warrants. The temptation will lead the reformer astray, because the people carrying the third kind of resistance are not, in fact, acting in bad faith. They are acting in good faith from a corrupted formation, and the corruption of the formation is the real adversary. The people are not the adversary; they are the carriers of the adversary, and fighting them as if they were the adversary leaves the adversary itself untouched. Worse, fighting them as if they were the adversary gives their formation a confirmation it would not otherwise have had — the confirmation that the reformer is, in fact, the enemy their formation has taught them to see. The reformer's anger becomes, in their formation, evidence that the formation was right all along.

The work, with the third kind of resistance, is necessarily slow, and it is not the work of confrontation. It is the work of restoring honesty between word and deed in the places the formation is reproduced such as the family, the school, the religious community, the professional formation, and the

means of public communication. This kind of work is generational. Its visible effects accumulate so slowly as to be almost imperceptible. The people carrying the third kind of resistance now will, in many cases, not be persuaded in their own lifetimes. Some of them will go to their graves believing they were defending what was good. What will change is what the next generation absorbs, and the generation after that, and across enough generations the formation will produce different kinds of people, and the people carrying the formation forward will, eventually, be people whose formation has been calibrated against what was once defended. This is the slow work of how a people corrects itself when it has gone wrong, and it is slower than the impatient reformer wants to hear, and it is the only work that addresses the third kind of resistance at the level at which the resistance actually operates.

I want to say one more thing, before this chapter closes, about something that follows from what I have just said. The reformer who has done the discrimination among the three kinds of resistance, and who has learned to address each kind in the way it requires, will find that they have become a particular kind of person. They will have lost a certain pleasure that the cruder reformer enjoys — the pleasure of having clear enemies, the pleasure of self-righteousness, and the pleasure of the dramatic confrontation. They will have gained, in exchange, a different quality, which is harder to describe but which is, in my observation, the quality that distinguishes reformers who eventually succeed from reformers who do not. The quality is something like a patient steadiness combined with a refusal to be deflected from the work. The steadiness is what allows them to keep engaging

the first kind of resistance in good faith over years. The refusal to be deflected is what allows them to keep naming the second kind of resistance without losing their nerve. Their patience is what allows them to do the slow generational work that the third kind requires. The combination is not common, and the world does not particularly cultivate it. But it is what the work calls for, and the people who have done the work that has held over time have, on the whole, have always possessed it.

The next movement of the book turns from the small dense places where the work has to be done to the larger scales at which the same patterns operate. We will explore what becomes of a country when the failures of trust and the misfiring of defences have settled as customs and social norms, what becomes of a country that has begun to find its way back, and what the question is that any of us would answer, when the moment came, by what we had been becoming across the unremarked days.

III
The Wider Country

The patterns that operate in a household and a workplace operate also at the scale of a country and the world, with larger consequences. Let's explore what happens to a people that has lost itself, what recovery looks like, where recovery has happened, why the institutions through which an ordinary society maintains itself have been weakened in our time, and the question of a particular well-known story, and we will close the book on the question that began it.

11

A People Losing Itself.

A country is, in the end, the kind of people its inhabitants have become in the aggregate. The same patterns that operate in a household and a workplace and a friendship operate at the larger scale, with larger consequences, and with three features that the smaller scales do not have, or do not have to the same degree.

The first is reach. The country is, for most of its members, the largest formation-producing unit whose channels touch them systematically. A household's formation can be corrected by the school. A school's formation can be corrected by the profession or the wider culture. The country's formation, for most members, is not systematically corrected by any larger unit whose reach includes them. Of course, there are religious traditions that cross borders, professional communities that operate at the level of the world, digital cultures that pay no attention to national boundaries. Indeed, these do produce formation, and for some individuals they matter more than the formation of the country they live in. But their reach is thinner, and it is uneven. The country, by contrast, reaches almost everyone inside it, at some depth, across many years.

The second is monopoly, or something close to it. The country holds levers of formation that no smaller unit holds and that no larger unit systematically holds either. Public education, the legal system in which its members transact, the currency they use, the identity documents that determine who belongs, and the media environment insofar as it is regulated or licensed within the country. These produce formation that a member cannot easily escape by exiting any one household or workplace, because the same formation is being produced through many channels at once and reaches them wherever inside the country they go.

The third is duration. The country persists across the generations of its members with a continuity of identity that smaller units mostly do not maintain. Households dissolve. Workplaces reorganise and disappear. Friendships end. Countries mostly do not; they change their leadership, their laws, their conduct, sometimes their borders and even their names, but they persist across generations with an identity that their inhabitants continue to recognise even when the entity has become, by any structural reading, a different kind of place than it was earlier. This persistence means the country accumulates substrate deposits across generations in a way that the smaller units do not, and that what any generation inherits from the country is the accumulation of what all the previous generations' countries deposited, plus whatever the previous generations added or subtracted, minus whatever has decayed in the interval.

These three features together make the country a formation-producing unit of a different character from the household or the workplace, without denying that those units are producing formation of their own, sometimes more intensively than the

country produces its. The household in particular is doing formation work of extraordinary depth in the years the country's channels cannot even reach. What the country adds is not depth in that sense but reach, monopoly, and duration — and the three combined mean that what the country becomes is being deposited, in real time, in the children growing up inside it, in ways the children cannot easily correct by exiting any one smaller unit and cannot easily see because the country's formation channels are the water they are swimming in.

It is worth making a note on cases where these three features hold less than the general picture suggests. In countries whose populations are substantially transient — the Gulf states with their large populations of temporary migrant workers, the settler countries whose demographic turnover has historically been high, and the small countries whose members frequently emigrate — the country's formation may reach its transient members less than it reaches its permanent ones. The transient members' formation continues to be produced primarily by their sending countries, with the host country adding a thinner deposit for the duration of their stay. The country's formation of its own citizens, meanwhile, continues to operate with the full force of the three features; the presence of the transient population changes the character of what is being deposited in the citizens but does not remove the deposit. The framework this chapter is about to develop holds in these cases, with the qualification that the reader considering their own country's situation should attend to which population inside it is being formed by which country's channels, and for how long, and to what depth.

By the time the children growing up inside a country are old enough to ask what kind of people they are, the answer has largely been laid down in them by the country that formed them. But by then they themselves are contributors to a process that has largely reproduced a newer version of their country — founded on what they inherited but bent to fit a different time. This chapter is about what happens when the bending has been going in a particular direction and for long enough that the country, without the people inside it having quite noticed, has become a different kind of country than the one its self-account still describes.

First, I want to lay out the four conditions that together constitute what I am going to call, with deliberate plainness, a people losing itself. The conditions will not seem novel anymore, because you have met all of them at smaller scales in earlier chapters. What is new is the scale at which they operate, and the way the scale changes both the visibility of the patterns and the difficulty of addressing them.

The first condition is the one I described in Chapter Six. It is when what is said and what is deeply felt and what is done in the country's public life have parted from one another, and the parting has gone on long enough that those inside the country have largely stopped registering the gap. The country's public statements about itself — in its founding documents, in its self-presentation to the world, in the speeches its leaders give on its high holidays, and in the version of itself it teaches its children in school — continue to describe a place that, in some important measure, no longer exists. The actual conduct of the country, in the matters that the explicit story claims to govern, has diverged. The divergence is often not concealed; it is in plain sight. But the

public conversation has settled into a truce in which the explicit story continues to be told, the actual conduct continues to be carried out, and the contradiction between the two has been allowed to become unmentionable. Anyone who insists on mentioning it has been quietly recategorized as a person whose contribution to the conversation is not welcome.

The second condition follows from the first. The voices that would name the parting have been driven from the conversation. The mechanisms by which this is done vary with the country's political arrangements. In a country with formal protections for dissent, the driving-out takes the form of marginalisation rather than imprisonment — the dissenting voice is denied platforms, denied funding, denied promotion, denied the small courtesies that the public conversation extends to its accepted participants. In a country without those protections, the methods are cruder.

But the result is structurally the same. The conversation continues, but the people who would have brought up what most needed to be brought up are no longer in it, and the conversation has become a conversation among those who have agreed, by their continued participation, not to bring up what most needs to be brought up. The remaining conversation can be conducted with great sophistication. It can produce a great deal of intelligent and well-informed argument and can give the appearance, from inside it, of a vigorous public discourse. But the discourse is operating with a particular set of questions excluded, and the exclusion is not visible from inside the discourse, because the people who would have raised the excluded questions are not present to raise them.

The third condition is the one this book has not yet described at country scale, although the materials for it have been present throughout. The channels through which the country produces the formation of its next generation such as its schools, its religious communities, its means of public communication, its civic associations, and its professional bodies have been monopolised, or partially monopolised, by particular interests, and what those channels carry has been bent away from honest formation and toward the production of citizens whose substrate-conditions will reproduce the existing arrangements. The bending is rarely explicit. The schools will still claim to be teaching young people to think for themselves. The media will still claim to be informing the public. The religious communities will still claim to be doing the work of moral formation. The professional bodies will still claim to be cultivating the integrity of their members. But across all of these channels, in many places, the actual operating effect has become the production of citizens whose formation has been shaped in ways that serve the interests of those who control the channels, and the production has gone on for long enough that those produced by it have, in many cases, come to regard their formed dispositions as their own original judgements. The country has been, in the strict sense, manufacturing the kind of person whose presence allows the current arrangements to continue, and the people so manufactured are, in many cases, unaware of having been manufactured.

The fourth condition is the gravest, and it operates by a mechanism that is more straightforward than the abstract language of substrate transformation suggests. I want to name the mechanism in steps, because the steps are visible in any

country in which the condition has been operating, and naming them will enable you to watch the operation in real time.

The first step is the identification of an enemy. The country chooses, at some moment in its history, to define itself against another country, another political system, another way of organising human life, that professes something distinctly different than - if not the opposite of - what the country itself professes. The choice is made for reasons the country can articulate and rally around: the enemy is a threat to freedom, or to faith, or to order, or to justice, or to the country's continued existence. The identification is not, in most cases, made dishonestly. The enemy is real, and the threat the enemy poses is real, and the country's account of why the enemy must be opposed is, in its main lines, defensible. The identification is the founding move of the fourth condition, but it is not yet a corruption; it is the precondition for a corruption that will follow if the next steps are taken.

The second step is the decision to fight. The country, having identified the enemy, accepts the obligation to oppose the enemy by whatever means the opposition requires. The decision is made for reasons that the country's public conversation can sustain: out of fear of what the enemy will do if not opposed; out of justice for those the enemy is harming; out of solidarity with those the enemy is threatening; or out of duty to defend what the country has been built to defend. These reasons can be honest. The decision to fight an enemy whose conduct is unjust is not, in itself, a corruption. Many of the most defensible actions any country has ever taken have been decisions to fight enemies whose conduct demanded opposition. The corruption is not

in the decision to fight; it is in what the country chooses to do with the decision once it has been made.

The third step is the imitation. The country, having committed to the fight, encounters the enemy's tactics, and finds that the enemy is willing to do things the country would not have considered doing in any other context. The enemy tortures; the enemy lies; the enemy targets civilians; the enemy subverts; the enemy operates without the constraints the country has built up across its own history. This may be as much because the enemy is particularly evil as it is because this is generally what warfare is and demands of warring parties seeking any tactical advantages. The country is then presented with what its leadership will describe as an impossible choice: to refuse to match the enemy's tactics is to risk losing the fight; to match them is to violate what the country professes. The choice is described, by those proposing the matching, as not really a choice at all because the enemy's methods leave the country no choice, the stakes are too high, and the alternative is unthinkable. The language of forced response is the language under which the imitation gets justified. The matching begins, often in small and easily defended forms, with the assurance that it is temporary, exceptional, and narrowly limited. The matching, in practice, expands. Each step makes the next step easier. The constraints the country had built into its own conduct, which had been thought to be foundational, are revealed to be discretionary. Once they have been suspended for the duration of the fight, they prove difficult to restore, because the substrate-conditions that opposed them initially have been damaged by the suspension. The country has chosen, at each step, to do what its earlier self would have refused. The

choosing has been described, at each step, as the absence of a choice and the cumulative effect of the choices is that the country has in the end become, in important respects, the kind of country it set out to oppose in the first instance.

The fourth step is the recognition that does not come. The country, having undergone the imitation, does not register that it has itself become what it set out to fight against. The explicit story continues to describe the country as the kind of country it was before the fight began. The defenders of the new conduct understand themselves to be defending what the country has always stood for. The substitution that has occurred — in which the old language continues to be used while the practice has changed — is not visible from inside, because the people inside have been formed by the channels the country was using during the fight, and those channels have been carrying both the old language and the new practice, presenting them as if they were the same thing. The country has become its enemy, and the country does not know it has become its enemy, and the not knowing is what allows the country to continue down the road without the resistance the recognition would have produced.

These four conditions, operating together, are what I mean by a people losing itself. They do not, in themselves, mean that the country is about to collapse. Countries in this condition can persist for a long time. They can continue to function, in many of their daily operations, with a great deal of competence. They can continue to produce art and science and commerce and law.

What they have lost is not their operational capacity. What they have lost is the integrity between their account of

themselves and the actual character of what they are doing. The loss of this integrity has consequences that accumulate slowly across decades and that, by the time they have become unmistakable, are extremely difficult to reverse.

I am going to name, now, some cases. I am going to name them at the level of the structural pattern, not at the level of the detailed adjudication that the political conversation around each of them is already conducting. You may disagree with how I describe or analyse them. That is welcome. What I want from you is not your agreement with the way I have read each case, but your willingness to look at the structural patterns the framework is describing, and to ask, with the discipline this book has been asking of you throughout, where in the country that has formed you, the same patterns are operating now.

The United States since the eleventh of September, 2001, is the case in which the four steps of the fourth condition have been most fully visible at country scale within the lifetime of the present reader. The country was attacked. The attack imposed a terrible set of specifics that demanded a response. The country identified the enemy as a particular kind of religious extremism that defined itself against everything the country professed to stand for. The identification was not made dishonestly. The enemy was real, and the threat the enemy posed was real. The country committed to a long fight against this enemy, for reasons that the country's leadership articulated and that the country's public, across both political parties, accepted: the prevention of future attacks, the dismantling of the networks that had produced the attack, and the establishment of conditions under which the attacks would not recur.

What followed, predictably, is the imitation. The country whose founding documents had outlawed cruel and unusual punishment built a system of detention without trial. The country whose legal traditions had explicitly defined certain methods of interrogation as torture authorised those methods at the highest levels of government, employed them across years, and then declined to prosecute the officials who had authorised them. The country whose self-understanding rested on the rule of law, conducted a campaign of remote killings whose legal basis remained contested across the whole period. The country whose constitutional tradition had been built to protect its citizens against the surveillance of their own government built a system of mass surveillance directed at its own citizens. The country that had presented itself to the world as a country of open inquiry, prosecuted with extraordinary energy, the journalists and the whistleblowers who tried to make the parting of saying and doing visible. None of these were, at the time they were undertaken, presented as a fundamental change to the country's character. Each was presented as a necessary response to the enemy's methods, temporary in nature, exceptional in scope, and justified by the stakes. Each was, in fact, a step into what the country had previously identified as the conduct of its enemies.

Across the same two decades, the explicit story of the country continued. The country described itself, in its public language, as a country governed by the rule of law, dedicated to human rights, and distinguished from its adversaries precisely by these commitments. The continuity of the explicit story while the actual conduct diverged was the third condition operating. The voices that named the divergence

were marginalised. Some were prosecuted and so the subsequent conversation continued without them. That conversation increasingly took the form of a sophisticated discussion among those who had agreed, by their continued participation, not to raise the questions the marginalised voices had been raising. A generation of young Americans grew into political consciousness inside a country that was, by its conduct, becoming a different country than the one its civic education was still describing to them. The four conditions were operating together. The country has not collapsed. The fact that it has not suffered visibly or materially for making such a bargain makes it harder to identify what it has lost, when it has lost a great deal, and the loss has been deposited, in real time, in the substrate of its media, in its politics, in its economy and culture that is forming the subsequent generations of its citizens.

The State of Israel is a case in which the four conditions have been operating across a longer period than the most visible recent months suggest, and the case rewards being looked at across the longer arc rather than at the moment of its present crisis. The case is also one in which the framework's apparatus has to do honest work about the founding itself, because the substrate-conditions the country has been operating under were laid down at the founding and have been working ever since. I am going to be careful here, and I am going to be direct about why I am being careful: the case is one that, in the current moment, generates intense feeling on every side, and the structural reading the framework requires has to be conducted respectfully and forthrightly, without being captured by those feelings or shying away from them.

The country was founded in 1948 by a movement that had developed across the preceding half-century in response to the long history of European persecution of Jews, which culminated in the systematic murder of six million Jews by the European country that had been, until that point, one of the most civilised states in the world. The founding movement was responding to a real and terrible problem, and the moral force of its case was substantial. The country it sought to establish was, however, established on land that was not empty. The land was Palestine, and Palestine had a people in it, who had been there for many centuries, and whose presence the more careful Zionist thinkers had acknowledged from the beginning of the movement. The phrase that has come down to us ("a land without a people for a people without a land") was not, by the time of the founding, a phrase that the more honest founders were willing to defend. The land had a people. The founders knew it had a people. The choice to establish the country anyway was the choice to displace, or to subordinate, or to find some accommodation with, a population whose claim to the land was at least as old as any of the claims the founders were making on behalf of the population they were resettling there.

There is a further dimension to the founding that has to be named, because it sits at the heart of what the substrate conditions of the country have been working with ever since. The population the founding movement was resettling in Palestine was, in its great majority, a European population. The Jews of Europe had been formed, across many centuries, by Europe. They had built lives, communities, intellectual and cultural traditions, in the cities and towns and countries of Europe. The crime that was done against them was a

European crime, committed by Europeans, against Europeans. The natural form of restitution for that crime was the restoration of those who had survived to the lives they had built in Europe, in conditions under which a reformed Europe would have undertaken the long work of ensuring that the conditions that had produced the persecution were not allowed to reconstitute themselves.

The conversion of a European responsibility into Palestinian displacement was a particular kind of moral substitution, in which Europe paid for its crime against the Jews with land that did not belong to Europe and at the expense of a people Europe had no claim against. This was not the only factor in the founding — the Zionist movement had its own internal arguments for the territorial outcome, and many of its members had concluded, on the basis of long experience, that European restoration was not in fact going to be achieved — but the European substitution was part of what made the founding possible at the moment and in the form in which it occurred. The substrate damage produced by the substitution has been working in three populations ever since: in the Israeli citizens whose state was founded on a displacement that has never been morally resolved; in the Palestinian people who were the population displaced and whose claim has remained unaddressed across nearly eight decades; and in the European countries whose responsibility was substituted for and whose substrate-conditions, in matters of antisemitism and its periodic resurgences, have been allowed to remain unaddressed because the substitution permitted them to be deferred.

The country, having been founded under these conditions, was for the first two decades of its existence operating under

a substrate that was, in many respects, capable of producing the kind of citizen who could have lived honestly with the founding and worked, across time, toward a redress of what the founding had done. The early Israeli state had real institutions of public deliberation; it had a vigorous internal political conversation that included voices critical of the founding's terms; it had a labour movement and a religious left and a civil society that could, in principle, have made the country move in the direction of accommodation with the displaced population rather than further entrenchment of the displacement.

The decisive turn was the war of 1967 and its aftermath. The country, having won the war, found itself in occupation of territory containing a Palestinian population that had not been displaced in 1948 but was now under the country's authority. The occupation was at first described, both inside the country and outside it, as temporary — a holding arrangement pending a political settlement that would address the larger conflict. The settlement did not come, and so the occupation persisted. As the occupation persisted, decisions were taken to establish Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, to construct a separate legal regime for the Palestinian population in those territories, and to develop a military and civil administration that became, over time, a permanent feature of the country's life. Cumulatively, those decisions began to lay down substrate-conditions in the country's citizens that the founding had not yet produced. A country can be a country whose founding was wrong but which is in the process of working through what the founding did. A country whose conduct, decade after decade, is to

deepen rather than redress what the founding did is a country whose substrate is being shaped, in real time, by the conduct.

The next half-century saw the operation of the four conditions in compressed form. The explicit story of the country continued to describe it as a liberal democracy committed to the dignity of all who fell under its authority. The actual conduct, in the occupied territories and in the country's relations with its Palestinian citizens, diverged from this story by a margin that grew across the decades. The voices within the country that named the divergence — including voices from the country's most honoured intellectual, journalistic, religious, and military traditions — were marginalised. The country's politics moved steadily to the right and the institutions that had once been capable of holding the country to its founding self-account were, one by one, weakened. The country had, by the early decades of the present century, become an occupying power in a long-standing and intensifying form, and the substrate of the country's citizens had been shaped, across two and a half generations, by the conditions of being an occupying power.

The attacks of October 2023 and the months and years that have followed have made what was already there visible to the world with a clarity that the long preceding period had not produced. The conduct of the country in the response — the destruction of civilian infrastructure on a scale that has provoked international legal proceedings of the gravest kind, the displacement and the killing of large numbers of non-combatants, and the conditions whose characterisation in the international community has reached language that the country's founding self-account would not have permitted — is not a sudden departure from what the country had been in

response to a brutal provocation. It is the visible expression of what had been laid down across the preceding decades. The fourth step of the fourth condition is operating here with particular force: the country whose founding was, in significant part, a response to the catastrophic conduct of a European state has, in important respects, taken on conduct that some of its own founders would have recognised with horror. The substitution is not exact. No two cases ever are. But the pattern is operating, and the operation is now visible to the world.

The substrate-conditions in which the country has been forming its citizens for some decades are now visible in the responses of its citizens to what is being done in their name. A generation of Israeli children is growing up inside a country that is, by its conduct, becoming something the more honourable strands of its founding tradition would not have recognised, and whose current self-description still describes in the older terms. The recovery of the country, if it is to come, will depend on the same conditions that any recovery has depended on, which is the survival of reservoirs of the older substrate, the willingness of the next generations to do the work of reckoning that the present generation has not done, the rebuilding of the institutions whose corrosion has permitted the present trajectory, and the patient maintenance of a counter-pressure against what would otherwise continue to deepen.

I have laid out the American and Israeli cases at length because each of them shows the framework's apparatus operating clearly on a case the reader is likely to have some familiarity with as I am laying them out right now in the latter half of the 2020s. I want to mention three further cases

briefly, not to explore them in depth but to make visible that the framework's claims are general, that the patterns are not confined to two countries, and that the structural reading the chapter is offering is available wherever the conditions are present.

India, under the political movement that has held national power for the last decade, is a case in which the third and fourth conditions have been operating with particular speed. The channels of public formation such as the schools, the press, the religious institutions, and civic culture — have been substantially captured and bent in the direction of producing a particular kind of citizen, formed in the substrate-conditions of a Hindu nationalism that the country's founding had been designed to hold in restraint. The country that had been founded as a constitutional secular democracy on the explicit principle that no religious community would dominate the public life of the new state has, across the last decade, and largely in opposition to its estranged twin that was founded as an Islamic Republic, become a country whose dominant religious community increasingly dominates the public life, and whose substrate-conditions are now producing citizens for whom the founding principle is not the obvious foundation it was treated as in earlier generations. Russia, across the longer arc from the late Soviet collapse through the present, is a case in which the same four conditions have produced a country whose conduct now resembles, in important respects, the conduct of the Soviet state its citizens had once been told they had escaped. Russian citizens have, across the last quarter century, been formed by channels of public communication that have produced the kind of citizen capable of supporting the present trajectory

without realising its contradictions with what the country had earlier said it was becoming. The United Kingdom, since the political rupture of the mid-2010s, is a case in which the long substrate-conditions of an imperial past that the country had never fully reckoned with have, under particular political pressures, been reactivated in forms that the country's more confident self-account of recent decades had treated as no longer available. Each of these cases would reward extended treatment by readers familiar with them. I name them here only to indicate that the framework is not the property of any particular country, and that the reader's own country, whichever it is, will reveal the operation of the four conditions to anyone who looks at it with the discipline this book has been asking of you to develop.

I want to come back to the discipline this book has been asking of you throughout, because the temptation in a chapter like this one is to leave the work with the cases I have named and not to do the work with the case that is yours. I am not going to do that work for you. The country that has formed you is a country I do not know in the way you know it. What I can say is that the four conditions, in some form and to some degree, are operating in the country that has formed you, just as it is operating in Sri Lanka, the country that has formed me and I still find most endearing, and in Australia - the country that adopted me as one of its own and the one I am most grateful to.

The parting of saying and doing in the public life of each country will have its own particular character, traceable to that country's particular history and current circumstances. The voices that would name your country's particular parting have been pushed to the margins in your country's particular

way. The channels of formation in your country have been monopolised by your country's particular interests. The enemies your country has identified, and the imitation it has undertaken in the course of fighting them, are particular to your country's history. You know the names of the events in your country's recent past that you would have to look at honestly to do this work; I do not. I will not tell you what they are. That work is yours.

What I can say is that the work, if you do it, will be one of the more difficult pieces of work this book asks of you, because it requires that you look honestly at what your country has done in your lifetime and in the lifetimes of those who taught you what to think you know about your country and omitted what you don't yet know that you don't know.

The instinct to defend your country against criticism, including against the criticism you would offer to it yourself, is a strong instinct, and a generally good one., because countries depend on their citizens' loyalty for many things that are worth depending on. But the loyalty that is worth giving to a country is not the loyalty that defends the country against being seen for what it is. The loyalty that is worth giving is the loyalty that loves the country enough to insist on it being the kind of country it takes pride in claiming to be. That kind of loyalty will be willing to bear the discomfort of seeing the parting of saying and doing in the country's public life, and will do the small work of helping, in whatever way the citizen can, to bring the doing back into agreement with the saying. The other kind of loyalty — the loyalty that defends the country against the perception of its own conduct — is, in the long run, the loyalty that allows the country to continue down the road it should not have continued down. It

is the loyalty of the defenders in Chapter Nine, whose defence of the institution becomes the agent of the institution's corruption. The country needs better loyalty than this from you. It needs the loyalty that is willing to see what it has done.

I want to leave this chapter on a note that is not despairing, because despair is the wrong response to the diagnosis I have just given, and not least because the next chapter is going to take up directly what despair tries to forget. Countries that have lost themselves can find their way back. The finding is hard, and the finding is uncertain, and the finding does not happen quickly and certainly is not guaranteed to last. But it has happened. It is happening now in every country, even as they are inventing new ways to lose themselves. It has happened, on the world-historical scale, recently enough that some of the people who did the work of it are still alive.

The work that helped countries find themselves after being lost then is the work that would do it again now. And that work is being attempted, in various places and at various scales, by people who are doing what each of them can. You may be in a position to do some of it where you are. You may, more likely, be in a position to do the smaller version of the same work, which is to do, in your household, your workplace, your friendships, your civic life, in the institutions you found, and friendships you build. It is the work that, when done by enough people in enough places, accumulates into the larger work of a country finding its way back. The next chapter is about what that finding actually looks like when it has happened, and about what it would require, in your country, for it to happen now.

12

Finding the Way Back.

The previous chapter ended with the claim that countries that have lost themselves can find their way back. I want to spend this chapter making good on that claim, because the claim, by itself and without specification, is one of the easier consolations to offer and one of the harder ones to substantiate.

The history of countries that have undergone the kind of substrate damage described in the last chapter is, in most cases, the history of countries that have not, in any meaningful sense, found their way back. They have continued. They have, sometimes, adjusted. They have, sometimes, told themselves new stories about what had happened to them. Mostly they have not done the work that would have constituted finding their way back, and they have lived ever since inside the long consequences of not-finding. This is true of my mother land Sri Lanka and it is equally true of Australia - the land that made me more than I imagined I could be. The claim that recovery is possible is true, but the claim that recovery is common is not.

I want to take, in this chapter, the case that has been studied most closely by serious people, the case in which the recovery, while incomplete, has been the most thoroughgoing

on the world-historical scale, and the case from which we can draw the most about what the work of recovery actually requires. The case is the recovery of West Germany after the war that ended in 1945, and the longer recovery of the unified Germany after 1990. I am going to be careful with the case, because the case is sometimes told in a way that flatters the people who tell it — as if the Germans, having seen what they had done, simply decided to be a different kind of people, and then suddenly became one. The actual recovery was not like this. The actual recovery was costly, uneven, partial, contested at every stage, and is in important ways not yet complete eighty years after it began. It was nevertheless real, and it produced, by the work of two generations, a country that bears recognisable continuities with the country that preceded its destruction while also having become, in important respects, a different country than it had been. It is the best worked case we have of the patterns this chapter is about, and I want to make sure I walk you through it slowly.

There are, I think, five requirements that any recovery of a substrate at this scale has had to meet, and that, in their interaction, are what made the German recovery possible. Each of them was met partially in the German case, and the partiality is part of what is honest to say about it. Some of what was not met has had consequences that the country is still living inside. But the five together describe, as well as anything I have read, what recovery has had to involve where it has happened. I want to take them in turn.

The first requirement is that there be something left of the substrate that has not been destroyed. A country whose entire formation has been corrupted has no platform from which the recovery could be conducted. The recovery has to be built by

some part of the country that has retained, through whatever protection, enough of its older formation to be capable of the work. In the German case, there were several such reservoirs. There was the part of the church — small, harassed, and partly compromised, but real — that had maintained, through the regime years, a witness to what the regime had been doing. There were the families, in many parts of the country, that had taught their children in private a different account of what was happening than the account being taught in the schools and broadcast on the radio. There were the émigré scholars and writers and artists who had been driven out of the country and who, after the war, were available to return, or to be brought back into the country's intellectual life by remote contact. There were the older traditions of German thought and law and culture that the regime had distorted but had not, in twelve years, succeeded in obliterating, and that survived in the formation of older people who had grown up before the regime and could draw on what they remembered. The recovery, when it began, drew on all of these. Without any of them, the recovery could not have begun at all.

This is the first sober point to register about recovery. It depends on what has not been destroyed. A country that has succeeded in destroying its own reservoirs more completely has, by the very thoroughness of the destruction, made the work of recovery harder. There are some countries whose substrate damage has gone so deep that the materials for the work of recovery no longer exist within the country itself, and the recovery, if it happens at all, has had to be built out of materials brought back from outside or constructed largely from scratch over a much longer time. The German reservoirs, in 1945, were small but real, and the smallness of

them was part of what made the early recovery uncertain at every step.

The second requirement is that the work of recovery be carried out across multiple generations, deliberately, with full understanding that the work cannot be completed in any one generation. The work the first generation of the recovery does is necessarily different from the work the second generation can do, and the work the third does is different again. The first generation includes the people who themselves carried out the actions that need to be repented of, alongside those who were too young to have participated but who grew up among the participants. The first generation's work is the work of beginning — of building the new institutions, of holding the trials, of writing the new constitution, of starting the construction of the public account of what had happened. It cannot be the work of full reckoning, because too many of the people doing the work were themselves participants, and a full reckoning would have required the destruction of the institutions the recovery was trying to build. The first generation does what it can do. It does enough to make the second generation's work possible.

The second generation is the generation that confronts the first generation with the fact of its participation, and that demands the fuller reckoning the first generation could not undertake. The third generation inherits the partial settlement the first two have produced and either deepens it or allows it to erode. In the German case, the second generation, born after the war, came of age around 1968 and conducted, in their relations with their parents and in their public political work, the confrontation that the first generation had been unable to conduct with itself. The third generation has done

the longer work of constructing the public memorial culture, the educational programmes, the legal and institutional infrastructure, that have made the inheritance of the period part of what every German child encounters as part of becoming an adult German.

This generational structure is not unique to the German case. It is, I think, structural to any recovery that has reached the scale of changing what kind of country a country is. Recovery cannot be done in a generation, because the first generation is too compromised and the second has not yet had the time. The work has to be designed with the understanding that the people doing it are working on something whose completion they will not see, and that the value of their work depends on the second generation's willingness to take it further, and on the third generation's willingness to consolidate what the second generation produced. The Germans, in the early years, understood this with varying degrees of clarity. The architects of the Federal Republic, several of whom had been imprisoned by the regime and several of whom had been in exile, were under no illusion that the work they were beginning could be finished in their lifetimes. They were trying to lay foundations that the next generations could build on.

The third requirement is that the public reckoning with what had been done be insisted on by enough people in enough places, that the alternative — the quiet burial of the past — could not become the path of least resistance. This is perhaps the requirement on which the German case differs most strikingly from the cases of other countries that have undergone substrate damage. In many other cases, the temptation to bury the past has prevailed. The country has

chosen, in effect, to remember what was convenient to remember and to allow the rest to fade. The result has been that the substrate-conditions that produced the damage have been allowed to persist, lightly disguised, and the country has remained vulnerable to their reactivation. In the German case, the temptation to bury was present, and in the early years it largely prevailed. The West German state of the 1950s reabsorbed many former regime officials into its civil service and its judiciary, and the public conversation about what had been done was muted. What broke the burial was the work of the second generation, who refused, with great public energy, to allow the silence to settle. The work of insisting that what had been done be remembered, and that the people who had done it be named, and that the country's official institutions be held to a standard of acknowledgement that the country had previously evaded, was carried out across the subsequent decades. That dogged persistence is what produced, by the 1980s, a public culture in which the period of the regime was finally being confronted.

The forms this took were various. There were the trials of regime officials, which continued long after the initial postwar trials and which kept the question alive in the public conversation. Then there were the historical investigations, including the major historians' debate of the 1980s, which contested how the period should be understood and which forced a sharper articulation of what had happened than the earlier euphemisms had permitted. There were also the memorial sites, built at the locations of the camps and elsewhere, which made the geography of what had been done part of the country's visible landscape. The construction of a public memorial culture was slow but decisively inspired. For

example, small brass plaques were set into the pavements of many German cities marking the homes from which Jewish residents had been taken, which made the period unavoidable in daily life rather than something one had to visit a museum to remember. Most consequentially, there were the educational reforms, which made the period a central subject of secondary education and which required every German student to confront, in the course of their formation, what the country had done. None of this happened automatically. All of it happened because particular people insisted on it, against resistance, across decades.

The fourth requirement is the deliberate construction of institutions designed to make the old patterns harder to reactivate. The German Federal Republic, in its founding, was constructed with this requirement explicitly in mind. The constitution, the Basic Law, was written in deliberate opposition to the weaknesses of the previous constitution that had allowed the regime to come to power. Certain rights were declared inviolable. Certain political parties were structurally constrained. The federal structure was designed to disperse power. The judiciary was given strong protections of independence. The educational system was reorganised. The country was integrated into the new European institutions in ways that bound it to other countries and made certain kinds of unilateral action structurally harder. None of these were guarantees of course, because institutions can be eroded over time, and the German institutions, like all institutions, have been under continuous pressure since their founding. But they were designed in awareness of the specific failure that had to be guarded against, and the design has held, with adjustments, for what is now nearly eighty years. The

longevity is not accidental, but the product of careful institutional construction, carried out by people who understood very clearly and broadly, what they were trying to prevent.

The fifth requirement is the patience to allow the work to be incomplete. This is, in some ways, the hardest requirement, because it requires the people doing the work to accept that what they are doing will not produce, in any visible time, the result they would most want to see. The result they would most want to see is a country in which the substrate-conditions of the damaged period have been fully eliminated and the country is, in the deepest sense, a different country than the country that produced the damage. This result is not attainable. What is attainable is a country in which the substrate-conditions of the damaged period have been partially counteracted, and in which the work of counteracting them has to be continued by each generation, because the conditions can return if the work is allowed to lapse. The work is not the building of something that, once built, will stand on its own. The work is the maintenance of a counter-pressure against tendencies that the country's history has shown to be present in it, and the counter-pressure has to be sustained.

The German case has shown, in recent years, why this fifth requirement is what it is. After several decades in which the work appeared to be going well, the rise of new political movements with rhetoric and dispositions that echo, in certain registers, the rhetoric and dispositions of the earlier period has demonstrated that the substrate-conditions had not been eliminated, but only counteracted. The counter-pressure was holding them down. As the generations who had done

the heaviest work of the counter-pressure have begun to die, and as the immediate memory of the period has begun to recede into history rather than into living experience, some of what was held down has begun to come up again. This is not a refutation of the recovery, but a demonstration of what the recovery was. The recovery was the construction of a counterpressure, and the counter-pressure has to be maintained, by each generation, against what would otherwise re-emerge. The work is permanent, because no generation is permanent and therefore it must be reconstructed and reinforced for and by each generation that follows.

I want to take from the German case, as I close this chapter, what I think is most generalisable to other cases of substrate damage and recovery. Recovery has, where it has happened, required that there be something left of the older substrate to build on and that the work be done across multiple generations with full understanding that no single generation can finish it. The public reckoning must be insisted on against the temptation to bury, and institutions need to be constructed in deliberate awareness of the specific failure to be guarded against. And finally, the people doing the work must be willing to accept that what they are doing is the maintenance of a garden rather than the construction of fort. Where these conditions have been met, recovery has been possible. Where they have not, recovery has not happened, and the country has lived ever since inside the long consequences of the substrate damage it did not undertake to address.

There are other cases we could have explored. The work of post-Franco Spain, post-apartheid South Africa, post-junta Argentina, post-civil-war Sri Lanka, post-civil-rights United

States, each offer a case of attempted recovery from substrate damage. Each of them shows the operation of the five requirements in different proportions, and each of them is, like the German case, incomplete. Some of them have been more incomplete than the German case; some have failed in ways the German case has not failed; some have succeeded in ways the German case has not yet succeeded. The variability of the outcomes is itself instructive.

The important lesson to internalise is that recovery is never automatic. It is what some of these countries have, with varying degrees of success, attempted, with or without the understanding that attempting is the work. The work's success or failure depends on whether and how well the five requirements are met.

I want to ask you, in closing, the question this chapter has been preparing. The country that has formed you, whichever country it is, has at some point in its history undergone substrate damage of one kind or another. The damage may have been the long damage of a colonial period; it may have been the damage of a civil war whose effects have not been fully addressed; it may have been the damage of a particular regime, now ended, whose substrate-conditions persist; it may be the damage now being inflicted, in real time, by the conditions described in the previous chapter. The country may, or may not have, undertaken the work of recovery.

If it has, the five requirements would have been met to varying degrees. If it has not, they have not been met, or have been met only in token form. You know enough about your own country to make this assessment honestly. You also know enough to identify, within your country, the people and

the institutions that have been doing the work of recovery where it has been done, and the people and the institutions that have been resisting it.

The question for you is whether you are in a position to be part of the work, in whatever way is open to you given who you are and where you are placed. The work has many positions; it is not only the work of those at the centre of public life. The teacher, by teaching the country's history honestly, can do the work. The journalist, by insisting on naming what is being done, can do the work. The parent, by raising children with awareness of what the country has actually done, can do the work. The friend, by insisting, against the social pressure of the moment, on saying what the moment's mood is forbidding, can do the work. These are all positions in the long work of a country finding its way back. You are in some of them already, if you are doing the small daily things this book has been describing. You may be in a position to do more. The next chapter is about the work you can do in the smaller institutions you actually have access to, which is, in the end, the level at which the recovery of any country is carried out.

13

The Quiet Ones.

There is something about how stories are told in the modern world that has, I think, worked against the kind of understanding this book is trying to develop. The stories that get told most often, in the entertainments and the histories and the political mythologies most people grow up with, are stories organised around heroes. Some particular person, of unusual capacity and unusual courage, faces some unusual situation and, by what they do, makes a decisive difference. The story turns on the person. The person becomes the explanation. Without the person, the situation would have unfolded the way bad situations unfold, but with the person, the situation turns. The structure is so deeply embedded in how stories work that it is hard, after a while, to imagine that other structures of explanation are even available.

The structure has its uses. There are situations in which the actions of particular people do make a difference that could not have been made by other people in the same position. There are individuals whose contributions to what humans have built deserve to be remembered as individual contributions. But the structure, taken as the general account of how the world works, is misleading in a way that has practical consequences. It encourages us to look, when

something has gone wrong, for the hero who might fix it, or to wait for the hero whose arrival will turn things around. It encourages us, when something is going well, to credit the hero who is currently in the position whose holder is supposed to make the difference. It encourages us to suppose that the basic question, when a place is in trouble, is what hero might emerge.

Certain kings or presidents or prime ministers - we are told - made our countries strong and prosperous. Under the leadership of others, they waned. Growing up in Sri Lanka, this is how I learned history. That is why I want to put a different proposition before you in this chapter, and I want you to test it against everything you have watched in your own life and everything you know from your own reading and study.

A town that depends on a hero to keep its life going is a town that is already in trouble. A town that is in a healthy condition is one that does not need to depend on heroes for the daily continuation of its life. It depends on the ordinary, unspectacular functioning of a great many institutions and relationships in which the people involved are, on the whole, neither heroic nor villainous, and whose work, conducted at the level of competence that those institutions and relationships have been formed to produce, is what keeps the town's life going. The dependence on heroes is, in the strict sense, a symptom of malaise and dysfunction. It is what a town's situation looks like when the ordinary institutions have become unable to do the work the ordinary institutions are supposed to do, and the town has come to look, in its desperation, to whatever individuals can be found who might compensate for the institutional failure.

This is the proposition and I want to develop it carefully, because the proposition has consequences for how you should think about what you can do.

The ordinary institutions I have in mind are the ones this book has been describing in different chapters from different angles. They are the family in its various forms, the school where children acquire not only their formal education but the formation of how to live among others outside the family, the religious community - where present in a person's life - carries the longer accumulated reflection of the traditions and which holds up standards against the daily drift of the wider culture. Now more than ever, they are centred on workplaces where adults spend the largest single share of their waking hours and where the work shapes the worker, and the professional bodies where members of a vocation hold each other to standards that the wider society does not enforce. Ultimately, all institutions and civic associations where people - including those from different formations - belong to and meet for purposes that are neither commercial nor governmental such as the neighbourhood and the small community where the daily reality of common life is conducted at a scale at which people know each other by name. These are not the institutions that produce the visible drama of public life.

They are the institutions that, in their ordinary functioning, produce the conditions under which public life remains tolerable. When they are functioning, you do not notice them. You notice only the absence of the troubles their functioning prevents. When they stop functioning, you begin to notice everything and the troubles their absence permits begin to accumulate at every level above them until eventually the

troubles become visible at the level of a national crisis - which is the point at which people begin to look for heroes.

I want you to consider, with the honesty this book has been asking of you throughout, what has happened to each of these institutions in the part of the world you have been living in across the years you have lived long enough to observe and have been grown-up for long enough to understand. The honest answer in most parts of the world, and I do not think I am being cynical here, is that all of them have been weakened by different processes operating at different speeds, and that the weakening of them has been going on for long enough that the consequences are now visible at every scale above them.

The family has been weakened by the economic conditions that have made it harder to sustain a household on one income, that have required both adults in a family to work long hours, that have separated work from home so that the parents are largely absent from the children's daily formation because of ‘work’, the extended family by their remoteness. The geographic mobility of careers is incompatible with the maintenance of the extended family ties that used to do much of the work the nuclear family is now expected to do alone. Similarly, the school has been weakened by the redefinition of education as credentialing, by the loading of social functions onto schools that they were not designed to perform and cannot perform well, by the de-professionalisation of teaching in many places, by the replacement of teacher judgement with standardised metrics that the teachers can game and the children can see through, and by the bending of the curriculum away from formation and toward what can be measured. The religious community has been weakened by

the long retreat of religion from public life in some places and by its capture by political projects in other places, or by the internal corruption of its institutions exposed in the form of scandal after scandal and by the contraction of its capacity to hold its members to standards the surrounding culture does not honour.

The workplace has been weakened by the patterns I described in Chapter seven, where credentials have made apprenticeship obsolete. The constant churn of personnel prevents the long relationships through which formation happens and financial pressures corrupt human judgement. The professional bodies have been weakened by the same forces, and by their own internal politics that have, in many cases, made them servants of their members' immediate interests rather than custodians of their members' formation. The civic associations have been weakened by the privatisation of leisure into individual screen time, by the decline of the local community as the primary unit of social organisation, and by the loss of the small organisations that used to do the daily work of bringing people from different formations into contact for purposes other than commerce.

You know all of this from your own experience. I am not telling you anything you have not already, in some form, noticed. The noticing has been part of the disquiet that has been growing in many places across the last decades, and that the people who try to give it a name have given various names that are ultimately inadequate for what they are commissioned to do. Whether we call it “the loss of community”, “the decline of civil society”, “the rise of loneliness”, or “the polarisation of public life” each of them catches a feature of what is going on without quite describing

the underlying cause or condition. The underlying condition, in the language of this book, is the weakening of the institutions through which the ordinary work of formation has historically been carried out, and the consequent thinning of the substrate conditions within which the next generation is being formed.

The dependence on heroes follows from this. When the ordinary institutions cannot do their ordinary work, the conditions the ordinary institutions used to produce are no longer being produced reliably. The conditions are still needed but the absence of them is felt as a deepening dysfunction at every level of the society. Society begins to look for compensations in their varied forms. Some of them are political: the rise of charismatic leaders who promise to fix, by force of their personality and their decisions, what the ordinary institutions can no longer fix by their ordinary functioning. Some of them are organisational: the rise of large institutions that claim to take over the functions at a price, which the smaller institutions used to perform for free, and that do those functions, at best, in a much thinner form than the smaller institutions did. Some of them are technological: such as the rise of platforms that claim to substitute for the small daily contact of human beings with each other, and that produce, at most, a degraded version of what the contact used to produce.

All of these compensations have a common structure. They are attempts to do at large scale, by spectacular means, what the small institutions used to do at small scale by unspectacular means. None of them work as well as the small institutions worked when the small institutions were working. The substitutes are, in the end, substitutes, and the society that

has come to depend on them is a society whose underlying condition has not been addressed by the substitution.

I want to say something difficult here, because the difficulty is part of what has to be said in any honest account of what the work of repair would require. The repair of the ordinary institutions is not the kind of work that can be done by the political and organisational and technological means that the contemporary moment most readily offers. The ordinary institutions need to be repaired, where they can indeed be repaired, by the patient work of the people in them, doing the daily things that the institutions are supposed to do, at the level of care and attention that the institutions were originally designed to deliver. The family is repaired by parents making the difficult choices to be present for their children at the cost of advancement in their work, by adults choosing to live close enough to their elders that the elders are part of the children's daily lives and by the small daily insistence on the practices of household life that the wider culture has stopped supporting. The school is repaired by teachers choosing to do the formation work even when the metrics do not reward it, by parents supporting the teachers who are doing this work against the pressure to demand only measurable outcomes and by communities defending the schools that are doing the work against the institutional pressures to reduce them to credentialing factories. The religious community is repaired by members showing up week after week and doing the small work of common life, by leaders accepting the personal cost of holding the community to standards the surrounding culture has stopped honouring and by the slow work of internal reform of the

institutions that have been corrupted. And so on, through each of the institutions.

This is unglamorous work. It produces no spectacular results. It does not generate headlines. It does not advance the careers of those who do it. It is, however, the only work that addresses the underlying condition. The spectacular alternatives on the other hand — the hero, the new large organisation, and the new platform — do not address it. They only obscure it for a while longer. The work that addresses it is the work in the small institutions, conducted by the people who are in them, at the level of patient daily care that the institutions need from their members in order to function. There is no version of this work that can be performed by someone other than the people who are in the institutions. The work cannot be delegated upward. It cannot be performed by the state on behalf of its citizens. It cannot be performed by the platform on behalf of its users. It cannot be performed by the hero on behalf of the population. It has to be done by the members of each of the small institutions, doing what their membership requires.

Now, I want to come to you. You are, almost certainly, either in some position to be part of this work or you will be soon. The positions are not glamorous. They consist of being a slightly better member of the household you live in than you have been, of being a slightly more present parent or child or sibling, of doing the small daily work of the friendships you have, of being a slightly more thoughtful colleague in your workplace, or of participating in the religious or professional or civic community to which you belong with slightly more attention than you have been giving it. These are not exciting prescriptions. But they are the prescriptions that actually

correspond to what the underlying condition requires. The disappointment of finding that the work is so unspectacular is, I think, one of the reasons people resist the diagnosis. The diagnosis directs them to a kind of work that does not satisfy the desire for the dramatic intervention that the surrounding culture has trained them to want.

There is a particular kind of person I want to portray, in closing this chapter, because I think this kind of person is more important than the surrounding culture lets on. This is the kind of person who, in some small institution, has been quietly doing the work for years. They are not famous. They are not particularly recognised. They may not, themselves, fully understand the significance of what they are doing. They are the schoolteacher who has been teaching honestly for thirty years, who has formed several thousand young people across a career, and whose former students will tell you, if you ask them, that this one teacher was the reason they grew up to be the kind of adult they grew up to be. They are the small employer who has been running an honest business for forty years, who has trained, by close contact, a succession of younger workers in what good work looks like, and whose business is one of the few places in the neighbourhood where the ordinary patterns of decent commerce can still be observed. They are the priest who has been pastoring the same congregation across a generation, who has held the small community of believers together through the storms of the wider community and the wider culture, and whose presence has been, for many of the people in the congregation, the single most stable element of their formation as adults. They are the local doctor who has been practising in the same town for decades, who knows the

medical and family histories of three generations of patients, who has refused the offers to move to more prestigious positions because she knows that what she is doing in her town cannot be done by anyone else.

These people, in the aggregate, are what holds a society up. Every town has some of them. Most of them have done their work without being asked, without being thanked, without being recognised, and without expecting any of these things. They are the figures the surrounding culture has trained you not to notice, because the surrounding culture's stories are organised around figures more spectacular than they are.

You should learn to notice them. You should learn to notice that the people who are most worth admiring in any place you live in are largely not the people the place is currently most paying attention to. You should learn, in addition, that you can become one of them. The becoming is not the becoming of a public figure. It is in fact the becoming of a person who, in some small institution, has done the daily work to a standard the surrounding culture does not require. The becoming is open to you. It is, in fact, what this entire book has been asking you to consider as the actual content of the work the book has been describing.

I want to be precise, before we close this chapter, about what is structurally distinctive about this kind of people, because I think the precision matters and the precision is not what the surrounding culture's stories about them, when it tells any stories about them at all, usually emphasise. What is structurally distinctive about them is not that they have been heroic; mostly they have not. What is structurally distinctive is that, at some point in their lives, they refused the bargain

that the institutions they were part of were offering them. The bargain was the one this book has named in different places at different scales: that the cost of compliance with what the institution actually does, as distinct from what it claims to do, is a payment toward a future authority that compliance will eventually confer. The institution offers the bargain. Most of those in it accept the bargain even though their accepting is rarely a deliberate choice. It is the path of least resistance, the route that everyone else is taking and the natural progression that the institution's structures have made into the obvious one.

The people who hold a society up are the people who, at some moment in their service, refused that bargain. They most likely did not refuse it dramatically. They most certainly would not have announced the refusal. They did not, in most cases, leave the institution either, because many of them would have stayed in it for decades after the refusal, doing the work the institution claimed to want done, but declining the small currencies of advancement that the bargain would have paid out to them in exchange for compliance with what the institution actually wanted done. The refusal would have cost them. It cost them the promotions they would otherwise have received, the prominence they would otherwise have enjoyed, and the seniors' approval that the bargain pays to those who accept it. It also, in many cases, would have cost them the easier accounts of their own lives such as the satisfaction of having been understood as having achieved what their colleagues achieved, the simpler narratives by which a life's work is usually reckoned. They paid these costs because they had been formed in such a way that paying them was easier than not paying them. The formation, in their case,

had produced a person for whom the bargain was not acceptable, and the unacceptability was the structural condition of who they were.

This is what you would be becoming, if you became one of them. The becoming is not the acquisition of unusual courage, but the formation, across the small daily choices of years, of a person whose formation has made the bargain unbearable to accept. The formation is what the rest of this book has been describing. The choices that produce it are the choices you are making, every day, in the small situations no one is paying attention to. The accumulated effect of those choices is the kind of person who is, by the time the moment comes, the kind of person who refuses the bargain when refusing it costs them everything the bargain would have paid out.

The next chapter is the last chapter before the epilogue. It is the chapter the book has been preparing you to read since the preface. It takes up one question, in detail, and asks you to give your own answer to it, in the only way the answer can be given. I have been preparing the ground for that chapter across the previous thirteen. The ground is as ready as I can make it and it is yours to walk into.

14

The Annex.

I am going to tell you a story. Some of you will have encountered it before, in some form, at some point in your education or your reading and some of you may be encountering it for the first time on this page. Either way, I want to ask something of you before I begin. If the story is familiar to you, please slow down, because the familiarity of a story can harden over time into a kind of stock piety that allows the story to pass over the reader without quite reaching them, and this chapter cannot do what it needs to do if the story passes over you. If the story is new to you, please slow down also, because the story is one of the small number of human accounts the whole book has been preparing you to receive, and it deserves to be received with attention rather than skimmed for its plot. Either way, this chapter is asking for your attention in a way that the rest of the book has not yet asked for it. I will not be saying more than I have to. What I say will need you to do work with it.

There were eight people in a small set of rooms above a warehouse in Amsterdam from July of 1942 until August of 1944. Their names were Otto Frank, Edith Frank, Margot Frank, Anne Frank, Hermann van Pels, Auguste van Pels, Peter van Pels, and Fritz Pfeffer. They were Jewish. They

were hiding from the German occupation authorities of the Netherlands, who were, at that point in the war, in the process of deporting the Jews of the Netherlands to camps in Eastern Europe where most of them would be killed. The eight in the annex above the warehouse had chosen, when the deportation orders for them began to arrive, to attempt to survive by going into hiding rather than reporting for deportation. They were able to attempt this because Otto Frank had built up, over the years of his business in Amsterdam, a relationship of trust with a small number of his Dutch employees, and those employees had agreed to take on the risk of helping the eight people in the annex stay alive.

There were, principally, five of them. Their names were Miep Gies, Bep Voskuijl, Johannes Kleiman, Victor Kugler, and Jan Gies. There were others who knew, or who assisted in smaller ways. The five were the ones who carried the weight of the hiding across the two years and one month that the hiding lasted. The work they did was the work of bringing food into the annex when food was rationed and the bringing-in of extra rations was, in itself, a piece of evidence that could lead the community to suspect that something was being concealed, the work of bringing in books and supplies for the children to continue their education, the work of carrying messages in and out, the work of maintaining the appearance to the wider world and to the other employees of the business, that nothing unusual was occurring and the work of making the business itself continue to function in such a way that the office above it could continue to be used for hiding without arousing suspicion. The work was sustained for two years and one month.

On the fourth of August, 1944, the annex was raided, on information apparently provided by someone whose identity has never been definitively established. The eight people in the annex were arrested. Seven of the eight died in the camps to which they were deported, in the months between the arrest and the end of the war the following spring. Otto Frank survived, by what combination of accident and constitution it is not possible to say with confidence. He returned to Amsterdam in June of 1945. Miep Gies, who had recovered the papers from the annex after the arrest and had kept them in her desk drawer, gave the papers to him. Among the papers was the diary his younger daughter had kept across the years in the annex. Otto Frank read the diary and, after some hesitation, arranged for its publication. It has been translated into more than seventy languages and has been read by something in the order of thirty million people. The young woman who wrote it died in the camp at Bergen-Belsen in February or March of 1945, of typhus, a few weeks before the camp was liberated by British forces.

This is the story you know, if you have heard it before. I want to spend the rest of the chapter on three questions the story puts to you, in the order in which the questions can usefully be put.

The first question is the question about the five. Who were they, before they were the five? They were not in any sense, what the surrounding culture would have recognised as exceptional. Miep Gies was a young woman who had grown up in Vienna, been sent to the Netherlands as a child during the food shortages after the First World War, been adopted in effect by the Dutch family that had taken her in, and grown-up Dutch. She was a secretary in Otto Frank's business. She

had married a Dutch man, Jan Gies, who was a social worker. Bep Voskuijl was, similarly, a young Dutch woman employed in the business; her father worked in the warehouse below the annex and was, also, part of what was being done. Johannes Kleiman and Victor Kugler were men who had worked with Otto Frank in his business for years. They were not religious heroes or political activists. They were people who had built relationships of trust with their employer across the ordinary years of an ordinary business, and who had, when the moment came, found that the trust they had built obligated them to actions whose risk was extreme.

This is the first thing to understand about the five. They were not, before the moment came that asked them what they would do, the kind of people the surrounding culture would have identified as the kind of people who would have done what they did. There was nothing in their public profile, before the war, that would have allowed a casual observer to predict that, when asked, they would say yes to two years of life-threatening risk on behalf of people they had no obligation to under any law or any public morality of the country they were living in. They were ordinary people, conducting ordinary lives, in the kind of jobs that ordinary people conduct ordinary lives in. The Dutch society around them was, in those years, producing a great many other ordinary people in ordinary jobs in ordinary lives, and most of those other ordinary people did not, when asked, say yes. Most of them said no, in one form or another. Many of them did not have to say anything, because they were never asked. Some of them, when asked, did the opposite of what the five did, and turned in to the authorities the Jewish neighbours whose hiding they could have assisted instead.

The difference between the five and the others is the question this chapter is about, and the answer to it is the answer this whole book has been building toward. The five did what they did because of who they had become across the unremarked years of their lives, well before the moment arrived. They had not, in those years, been preparing themselves to hide Jews. They had not even been preparing themselves to do anything in particular. They had been doing the daily small work that everyone in their position had been doing — going to their jobs, raising their families, maintaining their friendships, and conducting their religious or non-religious lives — but they had been doing it in a way that, slowly and across enough small daily choices, had laid down in them a particular kind of person. The kind of person they had become was the kind of person who, when the moment came, found that they could not refuse what they were being asked. The refusal was not available to them because of who they were. The cost of refusing, for them, was not the cost it might have been for someone whose formation had not laid down what their formation had laid down. The cost of refusing, for them, was the cost of being someone other than who they had become, and that cost they were not, when it came to it, willing to pay.

The first question the story puts to you is therefore the question about your own formation. What has been laid down in you, across the unremarked years of your life so far, that would or would not equip you to be the kind of person who, when the moment came, found that the refusal was not available? You cannot know the answer with certainty until the moment comes. But you can know something about it now, by looking at the small daily choices you have been

making, and the kind of person those choices have been making of you.

The Miep Gies who hid the Franks did not become that Miep Gies in August of 1942 when Otto Frank asked her to help. She had been becoming that Miep Gies across the previous twenty years of her life, in the choices about whom to be loyal to, what to consider as her own concern, how to relate to people whose interests were not protected by the law, and above all, what to do with the small daily inconveniences of being a person whose conduct was constrained by something other than what the law required. You are, right now, becoming the person you will be when your version of the moment arrives. The becoming is not theoretical. It is happening, every day, in what you do and what you choose not to do.

The second question is the question about your agency. The story is one of the great stories of moral agency in our global cultural inheritance, and it has been read, by most of the people who have read it, as a story about the heroism of a few people in an extraordinary moment. That interpretation is not wrong. But that interpretation has a particular consequence, which is that the moral agency the story dramatizes will be located, by most of its readers, in a particular kind of dramatic situation which demands extreme levels of courage or fortitude to face a moment of obvious danger, and where the decision that is made and action that is taken, history will remember and valorise. The sad irony of that kind of interpretation stems from its failure to place the story where it truly belongs - which are precisely the situations the readers themselves are actually in. The five who hid the Franks are admired. The agency required to do what they did is admired.

But the agency is, however, regarded as an agency that becomes available only in situations that the reader is not currently in, and unlikely to ever be. The reader, therefore, is permitted to admire what the five did without having to consider what the choices they are called to make in their daily lives are making of them.

This is, I think, the deepest failure of how the story has come to be read and interpreted. The agency the five exercised was not different in kind from the agency the reader is exercising, right now, in the situations the reader is actually in. The five had, before the moment came, been exercising the same kind of agency in the small situations that did not look like the moment. They had been deciding, in the small daily transactions of their lives, what kind of people to be. The agency they then exercised when the moment came was the natural continuation of the agency, they had been exercising all along. The agency was not summoned, in some sudden moment, by the demands of an extreme situation. The agency was the same agency they had been exercising in the unspectacular situations that did not appear to require agency at all.

You have agency. You have been exercising it across your life so far, in ways that, because they have not been dramatic, you may not have been recognising as the exercise of agency. The friend you have stood by when it cost you something to stand by them, or the colleague you have defended when defending them required you to take some small risk to your own position, or the conversation you have refused to participate in when participating would have required you to assent to something you could not assent to, would have been samples of the work you have done at a standard the

workplace did not expect you to maintain. The kindness you have extended to a stranger whose interests no one was protecting, or the small daily refusals of the small daily corruptions also have been exercises of the agency that, in the moment of the story you know, the five exercised at the scale the moment required.

The second question the story puts to you is therefore the question of where you have been locating your own agency in your reading of your own life. Have you been locating it where it is, in the small daily situations that the surrounding culture has not labelled as situations of moral consequence? Or have you been locating it, in the way the story has often been interpreted, in some imagined future situation that the surrounding culture has labelled as a situation of moral consequence and that, by being so labelled, has been removed from the reach of your daily attention? The first location is correct. The second is mistaken in a way that lets you off, day after day, from the work that is in fact being asked of you in the situations you are in.

The third question is the hardest. I have been holding it back, because the first two have to be in place before the third can be asked. The third question is the question about whom the story is being told to, and about what the telling of it is asking of the people to whom it is being told.

The story has been told, across the seventy years of its public life, as a story about a particular danger in a particular time, and as a story about what righteousness looked like in the face of that particular danger. The framing has had useful effects. It has helped to fix, in the conscience of much of the literate world, the recognition that what was done to the Jews

of Europe was a wrong of a kind and on a scale that should never be permitted to recur. It has helped to establish, in the founding of the international order that followed the Second World War, certain protections intended to prevent the recurrence. It has educated several generations of children, in many countries, in the recognition of what the danger looked like when it was operating, and in the recognition of what righteousness looked like in opposition to it.

The framing has also had a less useful effect, which I want to expose. The framing has located the danger in the past, and has also located the righteousness in the past. The story has come to be told as a story about people who did the right thing in a situation that is no longer the situation we are in. The story has come to be told, in effect, as a story about a moment that history has closed, and about a kind of moral demand that the closing of the moment has spared us from ever having to face ourselves. This is also a consequence of taking for granted that history is a linear march towards progress rather than a cycle where the past is both ever present and a portender of what is to come. The reader of the story is therefore left, by many of the ways the story is told, with the impression that the situation that it describes is not the reader's situation and never will be, that the demand is not being made of the reader and is unlikely to ever be made again, and that the question of whether the reader would have hidden the hunted child is a hypothetical question about a closed past rather than a real question about an open present and possible future.

This is not the truth. The structural condition that produced the situation of the five in Amsterdam is not a closed or resolved condition. It is a recurring condition, and it is

operating, in different forms and at different scales, in every generation. There are, in every generation, populations whom the dominant arrangements have designated as fit to be hunted, or fit to be displaced, or fit to be killed, or fit to be allowed to die through the withdrawal of what was needed for them to live. There are, in every generation, people for whom the structural question that the five answered with their yes is a live question. There are, in every generation, ordinary people in ordinary jobs in ordinary lives who are being asked, in some form, by some moment that may or may not look like the moment in Amsterdam, what they will do. The story is not the story of a closed moment in a closed past. The story is the story of a structural recurrence, and the recurrence is happening now and it will continue.

I am going to refuse, here, to tell you what the contemporary populations are to whom this structural demand currently applies in your own life. There are several reasons. The first is that I do not know where you live, and the populations to whom the demand applies will vary, in their identity and in the specific shape of the demand, from country to country and from situation to situation. The second is that the work of identifying the populations is itself part of what the demand requires of you. If I do the work for you, I rob you of the work, and the work is part of the answer you must find to the question that is posed specifically to you. The third is that I do not want to give you, by naming particular populations, the chance to react to the naming rather than to do the work of finding the populations the work is asking you to find. That work is also yours.

What I can say is this. There are, in the country you live in, populations whom the dominant arrangements of your

country have designated, in various ways and to various degrees, as fit to be treated as less than the full humans they are. The designations may be formal or informal; they may be loud or quiet; they may be in continuity with longer histories or they may be recent.

You know, if you have done the honest work of seeing your country with the clarity and objectivity that the previous chapters of this book have been asking, who these populations are. You need to know what is being done to them, and what is being permitted to be done to them, and what is being arranged in the public conversation so that what is being done to them is not adequately seen. You can also recognise now, how the dominant story of the country, in its explicit public language, does not describe a country in which such things are being done. You have, therefore, in some form, the situation of the five before the war, when the country they lived in had not yet declared itself to be the kind of country it was about to become. You have, in particular, the daily ordinary opportunity to make the small daily ordinary choices that will lay down in you, across the unremarked years, the kind of person who, when the moment comes, will find that the refusal is not available to them.

The moment may not come for you. Most people in most generations are not asked, in the dramatic form the moment asked of the five, what they will do. Most people in most generations are asked, instead, in the undramatic form that the years before the moment took for the five — in the small daily situations in which the kind of person they were becoming was being laid down. That form of the asking is the form your life is asking you right now. Whether you ever face the dramatic version is not the question over which you have

control. The undramatic version is the question over which you have control. The undramatic version is being put to you now, and will be put to you tomorrow, and the day after, in every small daily encounter in which the kind of person you are becoming is being laid down.

I want to end this chapter with the simplest thing the chapter has been able to say. The five hid the Franks because of who they had become before the Franks asked them. The reader who is reading this book is, in their own life, every day, becoming someone. The question of who they are becoming is being answered, in real time, by what they are doing in the small daily situations of their life. This chapter cannot tell you, the reader, what the right answers are in your particular situations. This chapter can only ask you to recognise that the answers are being given, that the answers are accumulating into the kind of person you will be when your own version of the moment, whatever form it takes, arrives. The accumulation is the work this book has been about. The work begins again every morning. There is no day on which the work is finished. There is also no day on which it is too late to begin.

The epilogue will be brief.

Epilogue: Beginning Again.

There is a table in the house where you grew up. The book began with that table. I want you to return to it now, before I let you go.

You have read fourteen chapters since the table. Some of what was in those chapters you already knew, in some form, before you began. Some of it gave names for things you had been carrying without a name. Some of it asked you to look at things you would have preferred not to look at. The whole of it has been an extended argument that the work of becoming a person worth being, and the work of being part of a people worth being part of, is the same work conducted at different scales, and that the work is done, where it is done, in the small daily choices of the unremarked days, by people whose names will mostly not be remembered, in places whose particular character will not survive past a generation or two of those who knew them, on behalf of consequences they will not live to see.

The work will not be finished in our generation, and will not be in any.

I want to be careful about how I say this. There is a tone in which this kind of statement gets made that I want to avoid. The tone treats the unfinished character of the work as a counsel of detachment, as if the work being unfinishable were a reason not to take its current state too seriously. That tone is both misleading and if you heed it, deprive you of the meaning of a life well lived. The work being unfinishable is

the structural condition of being a generation, and the generations that have done their work best have all known this and have continued to work anyway. The unfinishability is not an excuse. The unfinishability is the situation. Within the situation, the question is what each generation does with what it has been given, and what it adds to what it will hand on. The question is consequential, because the answers each generation gives have consequences that the next generations will live inside.

You have been given a great deal. The fields you are eating from were cleared by hands you will never know. The wells you are drinking from were dug by labour you cannot trace. The institutions that have made your life liveable were built across long stretches of time by people whose contributions to them are now invisible to almost everyone, and whose names appear, if anywhere, only in records no one reads. You did not earn what you have inherited. You owe a debt to the chain that came before you, and the debt cannot be paid back to those who built up the principal, because they are no longer here. The debt can only be paid forward to those who will come after you, in the form of an inheritance somewhat richer than the one you would have left if you had not paid the debt at all.

Most of what the paying-forward looks like, in any single life, is small. The patient daily care for the people who are close to you. The honesty in the work you do, even when no one is checking. The willingness to keep the saying and the deeply felt and the doing of your own life in alignment, in the small matters that no one will register and that, accumulated across years, become the kind of person you are. The friendships in which the difficult things have been said. The

participation in the small institutions of your community. The refusal to participate in the small daily corruptions that the surrounding culture has stopped naming as corruptions. The teaching, by example more than by instruction, of the children who are around you — your own, if you have any, and other people's, if you have time for them. The honesty about your own country that the rest of this book has been asking you to develop.

None of this is the kind of work that produces visible results in any individual life. The visible results of any individual life, looked at narrowly, are small. The chain, however, is not the sum of individual lives looked at narrowly. The chain is the long accumulation of small daily work, conducted by many people across many generations, and the chain produces results that no individual contributor could have predicted or claimed. The harvests we have eaten were planted by people who did not live to see them. The harvests our great-grandchildren will eat will be planted by us, in the daily work we are doing now, whose results will be invisible to us across the time we have.

There is a temptation to want more than this. The temptation is to want to know that what one is doing matters, in a way that can be verified within one's own life, by visible results that one can point to as evidence of one's contribution. The temptation is not contemptible. It is deeply and characteristically human. But the temptation, if indulged, will become a compelling enough reason not to do the work, because the work, in most cases, will not satisfy it.

The work satisfies a different criterion. The work is what one does because of who one has become, not because of

what one expects to see. The doing of it is its own evidence that one is the kind of person who does it. The results, where the results come, come into the lives of people whose names one will not know and whose faces one will not see. That is the structure of the situation and that structure is not modifiable. The work either gets done within the structure or it does not get done.

I want to say one thing more, before I let you go, about the chain itself. The chain has, in every generation, been carried by people doing what they could, where they were. Some of them have been people of great visibility, whose names have come down to us as the names of the figures history itself cannot forget. But most of them have been people of no visibility at all, whose contributions to the chain are completely invisible to anyone reading the histories, and whose existence we know about only because we know, by structural inference, that the visible figures could not have done what they did without the support of vast networks of less visible people without whom the visible figures would have had no platform on which to stand. The invisible ones are most of what the chain is. The visible ones are the surface of something whose mass is mostly below the surface, and the mass is what holds the surface up.

You and I are, almost certainly, among the invisible ones. But do not make the mistake of considering that a diminishment. The invisible ones are most of what the chain is. The invisible ones are most of who have carried the chain forward in every generation that has carried it forward. In fact, the invisible ones are what allows there to be a chain at all. Your participation in the work is the work. It does not need to be visible to be the work. The work, conducted in

your own life with the patient daily attention this book has been asking you to give it, is your contribution to the chain. The contribution will go forward from you in ways you will not see. It will lodge in the people around you, and in the children who are watching you whether or not you are aware that they are watching you, and it will, in some measure, become part of what they carry forward when their turn comes. That is the structure of what you are part of. That is the place you have in it.

The table in the house where you grew up is still there, in some form, in your memory at least. The people around it are some of them gone now, and some of them will be gone before you are. What was passed to you at the table is in you, transformed by what you have done with it. What you will pass to the table where you sit now, or the table where you will sit, is being prepared, every day, in what you are doing with what you have been given. The work begins again every morning. There is no day on which the work is finished. There is also no day on which it is too late to begin.

That is the whole of what I have to say to you. The rest is yours.